

THE VOICE *of* THE LARK

This is the hauntingly evocative novel of Suzette, the beautiful young singer who had the voice of a lark and the determination to do something about it. The author describes Suzette's dramatic rise to fame and fortune in the operatic world, her sorrows and triumphs, and the men who loved her—notably the young Russian Communist whose loyalty to his country forms the crux of the story.

Michaela Denis has a deft and sure touch, and although the idea for this novel was conceived some years ago, her impressive knowledge of the political scene makes her story in some ways prophetic.

By the same author
**LEOPARD IN MY LAP
RIDE A RHINO
MAID OF MONEY**

THE VOICE
of
THE LARK

Michaela Denis



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON
1914

*Printed in Great Britain by Willmer Brothers and Harnam Ltd., Birkenhead,
for the publishers W. H. Allen & Co., Essex Street, London, W.C. 2.
Bound by Adams & Harrison Ltd., Biggleswade, Beds.*

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Chapter One

THE audience was on its feet, shouting its approval and clapping wildly. The curtain swished down seven times, and still they demanded to see their idol. The curtain stayed down for a few seconds longer, then rose again.

'Suzette . . . Suzette . . .' they called. On the stage Suzette, in her 18th century gown of blue velvet with silver lace, held the hands of the other performers as they bowed in line. Tulotti the tenor disengaged his hand from hers, and pushed her forward.

'The applause is for you,' he whispered. It was a tribute to her that the other performers did not resent the remark. She was so generous, so kind. In fact, one of the performers in a minor role pointedly looked in her direction and clapped.

Another bouquet was being handed up to her. Graciously she smiled and bowed to the audience who loved her. The stage lighting flashed on her diamonds. They were real. The snowy wig she wore accentuated her exotic slanting eyes. Unlike many opera stars, she was slender and petite.

The curtain came down again. She stepped back, and the performers crowded around her. The stage manager, his voice filled with emotion, said, 'You were magnificent tonight. It was as though I was seeing *Figaro* for the first time.' Yet, he had seen *Le Nozze di Figaro* at least seventy times.

Her dresser Martine, who always accompanied her mistress and acted as lady's maid, welcomed Suzette in her dressing room, and congratulated her warmly on her performance which she had seen from the wings. Deftly, she helped her out of the cumbersome dress.

When the white wig had been removed, Suzette creamed her face and splashed it with a sweet-scented astringent lotion, then applied her ordinary make-up. She left on only the long, false eye-lashes which she had worn on the stage. Bill, her husband, and some friends were calling for her. They were going to dine at the Waldorf, as it was the last performance of that season at the Met. Suzette never attended parties during a season, but now she was due for two weeks' holiday before her next engagement.

She put on a shimmering gown of tiny sequins, which were sometimes silver, sometimes lilac, according to the way they caught the light. She looked every inch the great star that she was. Her hair, which grew to her waist, was wound into a smooth chignon. Her diamonds blazed.

Just as she bent forward to gaze at her reflection in the mirror, her husband came in.

Bill Brown's square, honest face radiated admiration and affection. He came up behind her. She had not turned her head, but their glance met in the reflection of the mirror. She smilingly tilted her head upwards for his kiss. The scent of her hair wafted towards him, bemusing his senses as always. At last, with an effort, he drew away.

'Shall we go?' he asked. 'The police are outside trying to control your admirers.'

'Are there many?' she said.

'Almost the whole of New York, I should think. You had better not stop to sign any autographs—someone may get hurt in the crowd.'

But she hated to refuse her fans anything, whether it was an encore, autograph or photograph, and could never get over the wonder of strangers treating her with such genuine affection.

There was a knock on the door, and the stage door keeper entered. 'We are all ready, Madame,' he said.

Wrapped in a full-length sequinned coat to match the dress, Suzette walked through the corridor to the stage door. The door was opened, and the voices of the crowd rose up around her. The police linked arms and leant with their full weight against the crowd which struggled to surround her.

'Here she comes!' shrieked a woman. The autograph books were thrust towards her. Suzette could hear snatches of conversation as she was guided forward by her husband and the stage door keeper.

'Is she giving autographs?' asked a Brooklyn voice. And then, as she was about to step into her car, she overheard someone say: 'How lucky she is. She has everything—how I envy her.'

Suzette turned in the direction of the voice, and for a brief second saw a young girl gazing at her, almost with hostility.

She entered the car, and it glided away from the kerb. As she sank into the cushions of the luxurious limousine she smiled. She closed her eyes, and her mind repeated the words she had overheard: 'How lucky she is. She has everything—how I envy her.' Her mind drifted back to the beginning. But the very beginning was beyond her conscious memory . . . many years before. . . .

The rue du Chapeau Rouge lay huddled in its darkness and dirt, like an old impoverished crone. A sinuous feline shape slunk from one doorway to another, its voice calling a persuasive invitation.

It was raining, with a steady drizzle, and puddles of sooty water hampered the few pedestrians. An old, immensely fat woman, in a navy blue suit which had seen better days, peered up short-sightedly at the numbers on the doorways. She paused before a rickety house in the ill-lit street, consulted again the crumpled scrap of paper she held in her hand, and pushed the door open. The ancient stairs were devoid of stair carpet. The cracked woodwork groaned with indignation at the massive

bulk of the old woman. She trudged upwards, her puffy cheeks blowing out with exertion. In her pudgy left hand, with its broad gold ring on the marriage finger, she clutched a black bag.

It was an announcement of her profession, the unfashionable equivalent of a gynaecologist's white glossy pasteboard card. For Madame Penet was a midwife. She was too fat, too old, part of her mind protested. Her breath had an aroma of cheap wine. There had been a time when the old lady had felt a thrill at the advent of a new human being into the world, but that time had long since passed.

Between the fourth and fifth floor she heard the plaintive notes of Algerian music. The smell of exotic foreign food lingered on the landing. At the fifth floor, she walked along the narrow corridor, which wound crazily to the end of the building. There an unpainted, warped door confronted her, on which were the words 'Henri Bois, Housepainter'. The state of the door belied the profession of its occupant.

She banged on the door. As if in answer to her summons a thin wail echoed from within.

'Too late again. Why must I come too late?' she thought to herself crossly. Now she would have the usual quarrel with the thrifty French, who always argued that if the baby came before her arrival she should adjust the fee.

The door opened. The thin, consumptive-looking niece of Madame Bois stood there.

'You're too late,' said the girl. 'Auntie's child is here already.'

Madame Penet's great bulk swept the girl aside like a matchstick in the wake of an ocean-going liner. The room felt close. Its stale air was crushing and rodent-nest warm. A basin of water stood on the chest-of-drawers beside an iron bedstead. The mother lay under the yellowing, threadbare blankets. Her worn, pain-racked face was waxen-white in the harsh light of the single electric bulb which hung, shadeless, from the ceiling.

The old woman barely had time to examine her patient before there was a loud tattoo on the door. Bois, the father, entered. He held in his arms two bottles of red wine. He was

not drunk, but nor was he sober. With an air of defensive cheerfulness, he said :

‘Is it time yet? And how is my dear wife?’

‘You have a daughter, Monsieur,’ said the old woman, eyeing the red wine with interest.

‘We must celebrate,’ Papa Bois said. ‘Marie,’ he said to the niece, ‘bring some food!’

He slammed the bottles of wine down on the table, and Marie, after a fit of coughing, brought half a loaf of French bread and some onions and put them on the table.

The Bois very rarely bothered about plates.

‘And what is there to celebrate?’ Henri Bois wondered, but silently, to himself. His wife had wanted a child desperately. They had been married for six years, and it had become a great sorrow to her that their home was childless. Her sister Therese had three emaciated children already, of whom Marie was one.

The two rooms in which the Bois lived were much too small to have another occupant. A baby in the house would make their conditions almost insupportable, but still, woman-like, his wife had wished for a family.

Madame Penet, ponderous as a hippopotamus, bustled around the bed. She took the wrinkled, red, squirming little creature from its mother. It was wrapped in a shrunken, hand-knitted shawl which had been used by each of Therese’s children.

‘Don’t you want to see your beautiful little daughter?’ the old monster cried. She pushed the small bundle into her father’s unwilling arms. He looked down on the tiny face, screwed up and puckered. Dimly he wondered if this little thing would ever look human. His wife had a strongly-developed maternal instinct, but Henri Bois felt no rush of paternal emotion.

He was happy, though, for his wife’s sake.

‘Perhaps she will stop moaning now,’ he thought. Aloud he said to the midwife, ‘Do they always look so red?’

The old woman bridled. ‘Why, she is a pretty little girl—look at her beautiful little hands.’

He looked at the flushed little fists and the delicate, wafer-thin finger nails. He could not see the slightest beauty in them. Obviously the woman expected him to say something complimentary, so he said 'At least it's not bald.'

He could not bring himself to say 'she' yet. He ran his hand over the dark, soft fuzz which covered the baby's head, and pushed the infant back into the old woman's arms.

'Give it back to Madame,' he said. 'It will catch cold.' It was hardly likely to do so in the warm room, but he was afraid of the responsibility of holding the fragile, doll-like body.

'Now, Mother Penet,' he said loudly, 'a glass of wine.'

Two hours, later, the new father and the midwife's voices were raised in song. Wearily, the mother longed for the light to be put out, for peace, for darkness. But it seemed inhospitable to make the suggestion, so unselfishly she bore the noise and the garish light.

Marie opened another bottle of wine, which had been kept under the bed. Both bottles which Henri Bois had brought in with him were empty. The crumbs and onion skins lay on the table-top. Henri had been smoking the strong, harsh French cigarettes of the cheapest quality, to which he was addicted. The room was unbearably stuffy with the bluish, acrid smoke. Every three or four minutes Marie's coughs threatened to choke her.

Annette, the mother, looked down at the child sleeping peacefully in the crook of her arm. She felt overwhelmed with love.

Henri had been right about the discomfort of having another occupant in their small home. It was not only the fact that they were over-crowded, but their slender means were stretched by another mouth to feed.

A housepainter in Paris was often out of work. The French will paint a house and its woodwork only as a last dire remedy against erosion. It was a common sight in Paris to see magnificent old eighteenth century doors disintegrating with neglect, flaking paint clinging desperately to the bare wood beneath.

Henri Bois canvassed for jobs. He would walk many miles a

day, knocking on doors and asking for work. He did his best, too, to get jobs from building contractors, and sometimes he would have four or five days of steady employment. At these times he longed passionately for the job to continue, but it never did.

Pride in his work would not let him go slow, even if the eagle-eyed foreman allowed it. His days of bachelorhood, without responsibility to his wife and child, seemed like a golden age. The family was constantly in debt. New clothes were an unheard-of luxury. But, however cruel the poverty, he was never tempted to turn to crime.

When he did find work, though, he would drink too much *vin ordinaire*. His wife grieved, but could not bring herself to begrudge him this one pleasure in their miserable existence.

She took the baby to the park nearly every day, in a broken-down perambulator which squeaked and lurched gratingly as she pushed it along. But always her happiness was real and intense as she wheeled her baby along.

As the months passed, she was thrilled at every stage in the baby's progress. The first time she sat erect, her head steady on her shoulders. She was thrilled at the first attempts of the baby to speak, and patiently she encouraged her to make the first sounds with her tiny mouth. What a reward it was to her to see the baby smile, and hear its innocent childish laughter.

When the child clung to her finger with her tiny hand, she could have cried with joy and pride at having created this small miracle.

Summer and winter passed. Apart from the wonder of watching her child grow, the Bois lived in a timeless vacuum with their poverty. For such a family there were no holidays, no journeys to the country or the coast. A day or a year meant very little to them, though the growth of the child meant shoes and clothes to be eked out of the family budget. Many of the poor neighbours gave Madame Bois the clothes which their own children had outgrown.

Little Suzette was a tiny, dark-haired, Oriental-looking child.

Her slimness defied the staple carbohydrate diet of the family. She had escaped the tuberculosis which ravaged Therese and her family. Marie was already dead, but three other children had taken her place. For with the terrible fertility of the poor, Therese was nearly always pregnant. Her large, over-bright hollow eyes would brim with tears as she imparted the unhappy news to her sister Annette.

Henri Bois' family had not increased, for which Annette had been truly thankful. She adored her little daughter, but even she could see that it would be a mistake to have another child.

When Suzette was six, Annette was compelled to go out to work herself. It was impossible to survive unless she did so. She found a job in a restaurant within walking distance of their home. She was employed in the kitchen, washing up all day long. Her hands became reddened by the hot water, and often her legs ached unbearably. But she carried on, uncomplainingly.

Annette often worked overtime to make a little more money, and sometimes when little Suzette arrived home from school she would not be able to get into the two rooms on the fifth floor. A young couple, who lived on the ground floor, took pity on the child as she sat on the front step of the house waiting for her mother, and would often ask her in.

It was through them that Suzette was first introduced to music. She listened spellbound to *La Bohème* on the radio, and that night she was far too excited to sleep.

'Maman,' she called.

'What is it, Suzette?' said her mother, automatically going to tidy the humble wooden bed with her poor, roughened hands.

'Maman, why haven't we got a radio?'

It was the first time that Suzette had ever asked for anything. She accepted the lack of material things which other children had as part of life.

Annette hardly knew how to reply. 'We are too poor, Suzette.'

'But Papa works so hard, and you too. Why are we so poor?'

It was difficult to answer. Annette herself had never really analysed the cause of their miserable poverty. Loyalty would not allow her to face the fact that if her husband had been more enterprising, he would have changed his job when there was no demand for his work.

Suddenly she wondered if they had been right to bear a child who could share only their hardships.

But she simply said, 'I will try to get a radio for you, darling.'

Long after Suzette was asleep, Annette spoke to her husband about it.

'How can we afford such a thing?' said Henri. 'We haven't enough to feed ourselves properly.'

But Annette was determined to get a radio. She started to save her sous. It was the first time that she had ever managed to save anything during the years of her marriage.

During that summer, she would take out a tin from the bottom of the cupboard, and count the money. The amount slowly crept up. By autumn she had saved half the sum she needed. She had already decided what kind of radio she was going to get. As the days became shorter, and winter approached, the frost started early. She was often happy now to work in the warm kitchen of the restaurant.

Henri, on the other hand, hated the bad weather. It made less work, and the jobs which did come chilled him to the bone.

It was Annette's custom to count her money in the little tin box every Saturday evening. Henri was usually at some bistro with his friends. He would come in quite late and go straight to bed.

One Saturday night, Annette went to her secret store. She picked up the box, and then cried out. It was light. She shook it, doubting and troubled, but there was no reassuring rattle. Suzette, hearing her mother's cry of distress, came running into the room. She carried with her a dingy rag, with a knot at one end, on which had been painted, or rather pencilled, an

approximation of human features. This was her beloved doll Brigitte, transformed by her childish imagination into a beautiful, golden-haired princess.

‘What is it, Maman?’

Annette did not answer, but with feverish fingers tore the lid off the tin. There was nothing there—the tin was quite empty. She cried; the bitter sobs welled up, impossible to suppress. Suzette saw the cause of her mother’s sorrow, and started to cry too. They clung damply to one another.

The sound of her child’s grief made Annette pull herself together. She made soothing sounds.

‘There, there,’ she said. She patted the child, and kissed her eyelids. ‘Don’t let Brigitte see you crying.’

The doll’s pencilled eyes stared unwinkingly at the unhappy scene.

‘Where has the money gone to, Maman?’

‘I don’t know, darling. It has vanished. We must start all over again.’

Suzette was put to bed. Her mother told her another instalment of the fairy story which gave such pleasure to both of them—every night the child listened entranced to an endless story of princes, princesses, good fairies and bad fairies, dragons and magic.

Long after Suzette was asleep, Henri came in. He was very drunk. As Annette’s eyes met his, she had no doubt that he had taken the money. He glared at her defiantly.

‘Well?’ he said.

‘How could you, Henri? How could you take the money I had saved so long for something we could have all enjoyed. You have squandered it. Is there *anything* left?’

Contemptuously Henri threw a few sous on to the table. One of the coins rolled off and lay on the floor. Annette began to sob again. Then her voice rose hysterically and she started to shout.

‘Isn’t it enough to be unable to support your wife and child? You have to steal from us.’

Henri, his temper roused, was angry and defensive.

‘Whose fault is it that we are wretchedly poor?’ he cried. ‘Who wanted the child, except yourself? You are to blame!’

Suzette awakened to the sounds of her parents’ quarrel. Never before had she heard the harsh and bitter scenes in their home which they so often heard in their neighbours’ rooms. An Algerian who lived two floors below them had once tried to knife another man, and such scenes of violence were not uncommon in the quarter where the Bois lived. Strangely enough, the Bois had never quarrelled with such violence before. Was it that they had both been too weary and apathetic to argue with each other?

Suzette crept to the door, dressed in an old blouse of her mother’s which served as her nightdress. By now her parents had forgotten the cause of the trouble, and were shouting insults at each other disjointedly, with the cruelty of people who love one another, and who wound knowing they will be sorry afterwards. There were things said which were so true, so brutal, which would later be forgiven, but never forgotten. Although they were both aware of this unhappy fact, they were unable to stop.

At last they paused. Suzette looked apprehensively at the hard brightness in her mother’s eyes. For a moment the child sensed that this woman was a stranger to her.

Annette turned towards the partly opened door. When she saw Suzette her expression changed instantly. She felt sickened and guilty that the child should have heard the quarrel. She put her arms around the thin young shoulders of her daughter.

‘What is it darling—why aren’t you asleep?’ she said. ‘Come along, I will tuck you up in bed again.’

The winter dragged on dimly. Annette had started to save again. She often changed the hiding place, but she never seemed to be able to collect the same amount as before.

Suzette suddenly developed a bad cough, and her mother, always watchful against the illness of her sister’s family, took the child to a doctor.

One frosty day, Annette was just on the point of leaving for work when there was a knock at the door. A stranger stood there.

'Are you Madame Annette Bois?' he asked.

Annette regarded this stranger in the grey overcoat, his long thin nose reddened with cold. A visitor at this time of the day filled her with foreboding.

'What is it?' she cried. 'Is my daughter all right?'

'Yes, Madame. But I am afraid Monsieur Bois has had an accident.'

Annette turned white. She backed into the bleak room, and sat down on a chair as though her legs could not support her weight. The man followed her in and, uninvited, sat down on the wooden box where Suzette usually sat.

'He fell from a high scaffolding at Felix-Foure—it was icy and slippery.'

'Is he in hospital?' she faltered, almost afraid of hearing more.

The man shook his head. 'It is worse than that,' he said gently.

Annette could afterwards only vaguely remember the painful details of the next few days. It was almost as if some kindly process of nature had deliberately dimmed the memory against the shock.

Somehow she managed to borrow the money for the funeral, and for the black clothes which convention demanded. She dyed a skirt and pullover for Suzette.

Years later, Suzette dimly remembered the way the black collar of the pullover had left marks upon her neck. A teacher had accused the child of not having washed properly—it was for her one of the first humiliations of poverty.

Ironically, Annette and Suzette got their radio from Henri. The firm for which he had been working paid a small compensation which enabled them to pay for the funeral and to move to a three-roomed flat. Annette calculated that they would have enough rent for one month, and that if she could find a tenant for the extra room it would add a little more to their

income. And only two days after they had moved into their new house, the ideal tenant presented herself at their door.

She was an old, fat woman, formerly companion to an Englishwoman who had died and left her an allowance. The old woman was no trouble to Suzette or her mother. She reminisced endlessly about her former life. Suzette learned much from the the old lady, who came from a good family, but an impoverished one, unable to provide their daughter with a dowry.

It gave Mademoiselle Herge an interest to give the bright little girl lessons. Suzette listened for countless hours to the radio, acquired at such cost. Music fascinated her.

When she was seven she started to sing some of the music which she had heard so often. She was especially attracted to opera. At ten, she had developed an uncanny memory for a melody, and at school she was always chosen to sing solo.

One day Mademoiselle Herge heard the sound of the radio coming from the living room. It was an aria from *La Bohème*, but a most unusual version, for some of the words were improvised with 'la, la, la'. The voice had an effortless, birdlike quality, as though the performer sang for the sheer pleasure and joy of living.

Mademoiselle Herge opened the door of her room just as the aria ended, and waited impatiently to hear the announcement of the performer. The sheer originality of the singing, using just a few of the words and then accompanying the music with the voice, almost like a musical instrument, appealed to her. The voice on the radio announced, 'You have just been listening to the London Classical Orchestra playing "Si, mi chiamano Mimì" from *La Bohème*.'

But who was the singer? Perhaps it had been announced at the beginning of the performance. Suzette was by herself in the room, setting the table for lunch with her mother. In the evening Annette ate at the restaurant where she worked, but mother and daughter always shared the mid-day meal.

'Suzette,' said Mademoiselle Herge, 'who was the singer with the orchestra? Did you hear the announcement?'

Suzette looked puzzled. 'Singer?' she echoed. 'There was no singer—the orchestra was alone.'

'But child, I distinctly heard singing.'

Suzette smiled suddenly in understanding. 'Oh, I was singing. I hope I did not spoil the orchestra for you, Mademoiselle.'

'You were singing! But you have an extraordinary voice.' She was incredulous. 'Do you mind repeating just the end of the song for me?' she asked.

'Of course not, Mademoiselle.'

Suzette crossed the room and turned off the radio, which was now giving a news bulletin. Without embarrassment, she sang and 'la, la, la'd' the last bars of the aria.

'Beautiful, my child, absolutely beautiful.'

At that moment Annette came in, with a large shopping basket on her arm. It was strange that now Henri was dead their financial standing had improved. They ate much better. They were still very poor and their shoes leaked, but at least they had enough to eat.

'What is beautiful?' asked Annette.

'Suzette's voice,' answered the old lady. 'Have you not heard her, my dear?'

Annette had of course heard her daughter sing, but so often that it did not sound unusual to her.

'You should let her have lessons,' urged Mademoiselle Herge.

'Yes, perhaps. . . .' Annette said vaguely, her mind already occupied with something else, for she knew that the expense of singing lessons could not even be considered.

The old lady went back to her room, and Suzette turned on the radio again. She started to hum the tune which was being played. It was the chorus from a piece of dance music, which she had heard only once before, and she sang it faultlessly. But her mother was quite unaware of the child's remarkable memory and talent.

Chapter Two

FOUR years passed. Mademoiselle Herge was a little fatter, Annette's dark hair was streaked with white, and the child was on the edge of womanhood.

Suzette was a slender, beautiful girl. She had an ethereal, oriental beauty. Her hair was blue-black, and her eyes had long, dark lashes. Her eyes were the most remarkable feature of her face. They were oblique, but large and luminous.

It was now time for Suzette to look for work to improve their financial situation a little, so Annette spoke to the manager of the restaurant where she worked.

'Is there possibly a job for my daughter?' she asked. 'Could she learn to be a waitress? Naturally, she is too inexperienced to be a waitress straight away.'

He thought for a moment. The restaurant was doing very well. It was near the Gare du Nord, and not only did they have their regular clientele, but also a transient one. People who had arrived a little too early to catch their train would often have a drink or a snack. The service had to be brisk and efficient, and there was sometimes a delay in the kitchen.

The manager made up his mind. 'What we need is someone to help with the washing up,' he said.

Annette tried to hide her disappointment. It was not much of a life for a young and beautiful girl to work as a scullery

maid in the hot, steaming kitchen. She was not ambitious for her daughter, but she wanted something better for her than she herself had experienced.

It had been a great struggle, but she had managed to keep Suzette at school until she was fifteen. She had been a good student, but the school itself had its limitations. It gave a minimum of education, and did not pretend to give anything approaching advanced studies or any specialized knowledge. Most of the pupils leaving school became shop assistants, and those who moved into clerical jobs either went on to a commercial college or studied at evening classes. Some took up domestic work.

Suzette heard the news of her job with pleasure. Not for the job itself, but for the fact that she would be earning money. She was mature for her age, and her mother had never attempted to hide the constant financial crises from her: now she looked forward to taking her share of the responsibility.

‘When do I start, Mother?’

‘Next week. You will need a pair of very thick shoes,’ warned her mother, ‘the stone floors are hard and cold.’

When Monday came, Suzette left with her mother to go to work. The manager of the restaurant welcomed her with some surprise, thinking to himself: ‘Such a beautiful girl—what a waste to have her in the kitchen where the customers cannot see her.’ He looked at her fine wrists and down to the slim ankles. She looked too fragile to carry heavy trays, and he wondered if she would be able to stand up to the tedious, monotonous scullery work.

In the Grille du Maman Odile the crockery was washed by hand and not automatically as it was in many of the more fashionable restaurants. The first day was nightmarishly busy, and Suzette thought it would never end. Mother and daughter had decided not to go back for lunch to the apartment. The employees were given one free meal a day, but the cost of the food was deducted from their salary for any other meal they took.

At last the dreadful day came to an end, and they reached

home at 11 o'clock. The staff of the Grille worked in shifts, but the Bois had asked to work the same hours, or they would never have seen one another.

Suzette soon got into the routine of her work. Although it was uninspiring, the extra money of her wages made mother and daughter almost happy.

The summer came. One evening Suzette had finished her washing up, and surprisingly there was nothing else for her to do—it was a quiet evening in the restaurant. She started to hum, and then to sing. Her mind soared with her song. In her imagination, the washed-out blue of her overall changed into a satin gown. She was the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Suzette often sang to herself. It was her greatest joy, and the manager did not object. As he often said to his wife: 'I like to know people are happy. When they are happy, they sing.'

That evening, two clients sat at a small table near the service door. It was tucked away out of sight of the window, and was a favourite seat for courting couples, as it had some sort of privacy. It was occupied tonight by two extremely well-dressed individuals. The older of the two looked vaguely familiar to the manager; he had seen his photograph somewhere, but he could not place him.

This man was du Pont, the famous impresario. He was discussing with his manager some last-minute arrangements for a performance at Biarritz. The manager would attend to the publicity in Paris. Du Pont himself would attend a charity show at Biarritz, and at the same time have a holiday.

They had chosen the small restaurant to have their last talk for several weeks because it was so near the Gare du Nord, and also they wanted to be free of interruptions. Such was the fame of du Pont, it had become impossible not to have people eaves-dropping on his conversations. Even the waiters seemed to lurk around his table more than necessary, so that they could report what the maestro had said.

At the Grille they had an excellent dinner at a fraction of

the cost of a more fashionable place. Annette had just served liqueurs with the coffee and had moved on to another table.

The business manager and du Pont heard the voice at the same time. It was not loud, but its pure and arresting quality burst into their conversation and held their attention.

Du Pont stood up in his excitement. 'Who can it be?' he cried.

The manager walked over to the cashier. 'Madame,' he said, 'there is someone singing in the kitchen.'

'I hope it is not annoying you, Monsieur. We will ask her to be quiet.'

'No, no. On the contrary. It does not disturb us in the way you mean. We would like to meet the singer. Can you arrange it?'

'I will ask for her to be sent to your table, Monsieur.'

Louise, one of the waitresses, came to fetch Suzette. 'Two gentlemen have asked to speak to you, my dear.'

Suzette seized the kitchen soap, hastily washed her hands and dried them. They were reddened by constant immersion in hot water. Her face felt damp from the steamy kitchen. She brushed back a lock of hair from her forehead, straightened her overall, and stepped into the other world of the restaurant, which she hardly ever saw. Although not elegant, it was infinitely more glamorous to her than the dingy scullery.

Louise took her up to du Pont's table. He looked up and saw a young girl, with flushed cheeks and olive complexion. She had black, straight hair coiled into a smooth chignon. The eyes were large, frightened—like some startled wild animal.

'Were you singing just now?' he asked.

'I was, sir,' faltered Suzette. 'I am sorry, I hope I have not annoyed you.'

'You have not annoyed me at all, my dear. Has anyone ever commented on your voice?'

'One or two people,' said Suzette modestly.

'I would like you to go to this address,' said du Pont. He scribbled on the back of a visiting card. 'Don't forget,' he said,

'this is important. Not only to me, but to you. You have a very beautiful voice. It should be trained.'

'But I have no money.'

'We may arrange something to help you,' he said, 'Don't worry about the expense. All you have to do now is to go to this address. Tomorrow.'

Suzette read on the reverse of the visiting card 'Madame von Wagenstrate', followed by the address. She had heard of Madame von Wagenstrate, and knew that she was a famous singing teacher. It was incredible. She turned the card over, and was even more surprised to see the name of the famous impresario.

'Why Monsieur du Pont!' She knew that name, too. He looked at his watch and got up. He shook her hand and patted her shoulder gently.

'I have a feeling that this is a most momentous dinner.'

He said no more. Starry-eyed, Suzette went back to the kitchen. Her mother followed her.

'What did he say, Suzette?' Her mother had been watching anxiously. Why had one of the well-dressed gentlemen given Suzette his card? She was filled with anxiety.

Without a word, Suzette handed her the card. Her mother read the address, but it meant nothing to her. Suzette explained: 'Mother, this is the greatest singing teacher of all time. She taught Tarloni and Varnelle. And du Pont is the great impresario. Don't you remember the interview he gave in the newspaper on Saturday? He said that it was a pity they could not produce *Mignon* at the Paris Opera House this season, because there is no one suitable to take the principal role.'

'Why, yes,' said Annette. 'Can that be the same du Pont?'

'Of course, Mother. Don't you remember the picture?'

Annette did have a vague recollection, and agreed it might be possible. Mother and daughter always read the newspapers thoroughly. They could not afford to buy books, but they often acquired a newspaper when a customer left one behind in the restaurant.

Suzette and Annette told Mademoiselle Herge the good news the next morning. The old lady was delighted.

'What have I always told you, my child?' she said, in the proud tones of one who has already discovered a protégée. She was merely having her judgement endorsed by the greatest authority in Paris.

The next day was Sunday, so Suzette and Annette had the day off.

'What shall I wear?' young Suzette asked. It was a question very easily answered. She had one black skirt, a thick black woollen jersey and a little black cotton blouse which she had made herself with a remnant from the Bon Marche. It had a small demure collar and tiny sleeves.

'Don't worry about how you are dressed,' Mademoiselle Herge said. 'That is the least of your worries. It is your glorious voice which interests Monsieur.'

Even so, just as Suzette was leaving for her appointment, the old lady opened the door of her room. Suzette had black shoes, but was carrying a brown handbag. Mademoiselle Herge thrust an English black calf bag into the girl's hands. 'Borrow this, my dear. I know you will take care of it. It was the last Christmas present from my dear friend.'

Suzette knew that the old lady always referred to Miss Harrington, for whom she had worked for so many years, as 'my dear friend'. Even after her death, she could not quite bring herself to address her as Isabel.

'There is something else you may care to wear,' said Mademoiselle Herge, drawing Suzette into her room, which had a close, unventilated old-clothes smell about it. She handed her something carefully wrapped in tissue paper. It was an exquisite lace fichu.

'How beautiful!' Suzette exclaimed.

'I made it myself when I was seventeen,' the old lady said proudly. 'I want you to accept it as a present. And may it bring you luck.'

She kissed the girl, and patted her cheek fondly. 'You are a good girl,' she added, and turned her head away to wipe her eyes.

Suzette let the folds of the fichu hang beneath the collar of her blouse. 'It looks beautiful like that,' she said.

Suzette ran downstairs and into the sunshine. Mademoiselle Herge's finery had given her the mental lift which new clothes give to every woman.

There were admiring glances for the young girl as she sped along to keep her appointment. She arrived at Madame von Wagenstrate's studio, which was in a large, old house on the rue de Mironsmenil, and knocked on the solid, well-polished mahogany door. A tall, well-built woman, with iron-grey hair beautifully coiffured, answered the door. The warmth of her smile enveloped the young girl, putting her at her ease instantly. She held out both hands in a large, almost theatrical gesture of welcome.

'Come in,' she cried. 'You must be the young lady whom Etien du Pont described to me.'

The studio was an enormous room, with highly polished parquet flooring and three Persian carpets spread casually on it. In one corner of the room was a grand piano. There were several Louis XIV chairs and sofa tables, on which were signed photographs of famous opera stars. Many of the men and women, dressed in their theatrical costumes, were household names of many years ago.

The young girl stared at the pictures in awe and fascination.

'If Monsieur du Pont has not exaggerated, you may soon see your photograph in my picture gallery,' said Madame von Wagenstrate. 'How long have you been interested in singing?'

'I have enjoyed singing for as long as I can remember,' answered Suzette. 'You know that I have never had lessons?'

'That means nothing. It is even an advantage. So many voices are ruined by training too young. A voice must not be forced. I much prefer to start working with a voice at just your age. You are about eighteen, I suppose?'

'I am sixteen,' said Suzette.

'You are the type who will probably look the same age from sixteen to sixty. Don't worry if you look a little older than your years now.'

There was a slight pause. Suzette stole a quick glance out of the long french windows, heavily curtained with midnight blue velvet. Outside she could see a little courtyard, with a small statue of a faun holding the pipes of pan, and some shrubs in pots.

'Have you brought any music?' asked Madame.

'No, I cannot read music. My teacher has been the radio.'

'We have such a selection of music here—there is almost certainly something you are familiar with.'

The doorbell rang, and the singer went to open it. The deep voice of a man could be heard apologizing for being late.

'I had to park my car four blocks away and walk back. What has happened today, that there are so many cars outside?'

'Sophie is giving an audition for the corps de ballet of *The Princess*.

Suzette, who had again been gazing out of the window, turned to greet the new arrival. A chunky, dark-haired man walked with Madame across the studio, and she introduced him.

'May I present Jean-Paul Lamont, my accompanist. This is Suzette Bois, who has come to us through Etien du Pont.'

The accompanist raised his dark, thick eyebrows. He looked at the slim young girl, who might still have been at school, with interest and something like respect. Du Pont was rarely wrong in his judgement of a potential star. Madame von Wagenstrate turned to Suzette.

'Monsieur du Pont told me he had overheard you singing. Would you mind singing this piece for us?'

Suzette nodded, unable to trust herself to speak. She felt elated yet terrified. Supposing, she thought, that for once du Pont's judgement had been at fault!

It was too late to back out of the audition now, so bravely she squared her shoulders.

'I will sing for you with pleasure, Madame.'

Madame von Wagenstrate placed the score on the piano. Suzette looked at her across the room, feeling like a French aristocrat taking her last ride in the tumbril to the guillotine.

The first two bars could hardly be heard, she was so intensely nervous. And then, in the magic of the music she forgot her nervousness. Suddenly she was singing, with the gay, carefree quality which had immediately caught and held du Pont's attention.

When the music came to an end, she was actually smiling, her face transfigured with pleasure.

'Bravo!' cried Madame, clapping her hands. Suzette no longer felt elated. She looked anxiously at the accompanist. He and Madame were smiling and nodding at one another.

'What did you think?' she asked, although the verdict was obvious.

'Will you please sing something else you know?' asked Madame. 'I think we could bear to hear some more.'

Altogether, Suzette sang four songs. Madame then took her arm and led her out of the studio into a little sitting room, and they both sat down.

'Monsieur du Pont has made a suggestion, and I want to know if you will accept. You must, of course, consult your mother and father about it.'

'My father is dead,' said Suzette, 'but I must discuss whatever Monsieur du Pont has in mind with my mother.'

Madame von Wagenstrate began again. 'Monsieur du Pont was very certain that you have a unique voice. and that with the proper training and a lot of hard work you may very well have star quality. He said that if my judgement confirmed his, I was to tell you that he will pay you a salary and the fees for your lessons. In return he is to be your sole agent and advisor. You will in time have to repay him for the lessons and pay him a percentage of your earnings.'

Suzette could not believe what she had heard. It was a piece of fortune she had never even dreamed of.

'I will have to give a week's notice to the manager of the restaurant,' said Suzette, 'then I shall be free to start whenever you wish.'

'You will have to have a daily lesson,' said Madame. 'Your voice will be trained, and you will have to do a great deal of

reading. It would be an advantage to be able to read music. You must be physically fit. For a serious student parties must be very infrequent.'

Suzette smiled. 'I have never been to a proper party. We cannot afford any kind of social life.'

Madame von Wagenstrate patted Suzette's arm. 'My dear, poverty in youth is the best incentive to success.' She made a wide gesture with her hand, which embraced the luxurious studio. 'No one could have been poorer than I. My father left us completely penniless. Our chateau was sold up almost before his body was cold, and yet, you see after these many years I have managed to buy back some of our family furniture. Harsh poverty was a spur to ambition, and now I work for pleasure and not from necessity.'

Suzette said her goodbyes and strolled back to her home. The bright sunshine seemed like a good omen. Gay, lively, lovely Paris was swarming with people who looked happier than usual, or so it seemed to Suzette. It was as though everything echoed her own happiness. She felt she could not even talk about her good fortune until she had savoured it herself.

She arrived home at last, ran up the stairs and let herself into the apartment. How glad she was that she and her mother were working late this evening. Suzette tried to make her face look sad, so that she would have the joy of surprising her mother with her enormous success.

But Annette knew her much too well to be deceived. She ran to Suzette and kissed and hugged her. Mademoiselle Herge opened her door. She had been washing her hair, and a towel was wrapped around her head turban fashion.

'When do you start?' she asked breathlessly. The headgear slipped to one side, and she righted it with one of her fat little hands.

The old lady followed mother and daughter into their living room. Annette had brewed some coffee, and signalled to Mademoiselle to sit down with them.

'Now, tell us all about it,' she said.

Suzette was incoherent at first, but with Mademoiselle's help

and with questions from her mother, they sorted out what she was saying.

'I knew it,' said Mademoiselle Herge, 'what did I tell you? Did I not say that the child had talent?'

That evening Suzette gave notice to the manager. He had heard only a little of the visit of Monsieur du Pont and its outcome, and now he was as eager as any of the girls at the Grille to hear the news.

She had to tell her story over and over again, and each time she would remember another delightful detail which she had missed before.

'So, you are going to be famous! And to think you worked here!' The manager's wife suggested they should put a plaque on the wall outside the restaurant to say that the famous opera star, Suzette Bois, had made her first appearance at the Grille. When the laughter had subsided, Suzette said: 'But I must not forget the customers, God bless them.' She put on her pale blue overall, and thought as she did so that she would be wearing it only six times more.

As mother and daughter left the restaurant, arm in arm, to go home that night, Suzette said: 'There will come a time, Mother, when you will not have to work so hard. I want to give you clothes, a house, and all the luxuries you could wish for. I want to see you relax and enjoy living as you have never enjoyed it before.'

'My darling,' Annette said, her voice choked with emotion.

'I know you have had a hard life, Mother, although you have never grumbled. I have seen all the sacrifices you made for me.'

At the back of Suzette's mind was that painful scene, so long ago, when her father and mother had their first serious quarrel. She had forgotten the details, but the feeling that she owed much to her mother, and that Annette's life would have been more comfortable if she had not been born, stayed with her.

'But you have been my greatest joy, Suzette. I have never wanted you to feel you owe me anything at all. A mother gives

a child all that she can of herself and what she has, because it is a pleasure. To see the small and helpless thing, which is so much a part of oneself, grow into maturity, is a joy which I hope you will experience one day.'

Suzette squeezed her arm as they reached their house. She was already imagining her mother carefree and happy, with all the little luxuries which would mean so much to her. 'In our case,' she thought, 'it will be necessities first.' She remembered how, at one time when things were worse than usual, they had eaten what her mother had called 'kettle broth'. This was made with stale bread cut into pieces, with boiling water, salt and pepper added. When it was cold outside, and there was no other food, not even coffee, it was remarkable how good kettle broth tasted.

Upstairs, they found a letter waiting for them. Mademoiselle Herge brought it to Suzette, and it was obvious from the way she lingered, that she was consumed with curiosity to know what it contained. For the Bois, a year or two might go by without mail, and a letter was a great excitement for them. Suzette tore open the envelope with trembling fingers, and drew out a typewritten sheet. She read it aloud.

'Dear Mademoiselle Suzette,' the letter began. 'I have heard from Madame von Wagenstrate that you will begin your studies in a week. My lawyer is drawing up a contract which will be submitted to you for signature, and from next week I shall be paying you the sum of . . .' Suzette gasped, for the sum was three times what she had been earning at the Grille.

'My dear, my dear!' cried Mademoiselle Herge. She burst out crying, quickly followed by Annette. Suzette could hardly believe her good fortune, and was sure something would go wrong. Perhaps Monsieur du Pont would change his mind, or it might all be some cruel joke. Maybe tomorrow she would wake up and find her voice no longer beautiful. But no, again she read the letter. There it was in black and white. The first step on the ladder of success.

Chapter Three

THERE were times when Suzette could have screamed with boredom: over and over again she sang the voice exercises which Madame von Wagenstrate demanded.

'Me—me—me,' Suzette sang.

'Now once again, throw your voice forward.'

'Me—me—me,' Suzette would try again.

Back at the flat she would practise for another two hours, until the taxi driver who lived in the flat below tapped angrily on the ceiling with a broomstick, forcing her into silence. Then she would go for a walk with her mother to the park, where long ago Annette had wheeled her daughter in the rickety perambulator. Sometimes, Mademoiselle Herge would come with them, but rarely, for she walked very slowly and felt the cold.

Suzette spent some of her time reading. She also had another undreamed-of pleasure—Madame van Wagenstrate often gave her tickets for concerts and the opera. 'This is part of your training,' she would say to Suzette. 'You must see the other artistes perform and learn to evaluate them.'

From time to time Etien du Pont would arrive in Paris and demand to hear her sing. He was well pleased with her progress.

Suzette had studied several opera scores, but her only ap-

pearances so far had been for charity performances at concerts. Although the concerts had not been important affairs, she had attracted much attention, and had already been offered a job with a small opera company. Du Pont had told her to refuse all offers except those which he arranged.

‘When the time comes, I will see that you get a contract. But whatever happens, I do not want you to make your début before you are ready for it.’

Suzette obeyed him, not only because she had faith in his judgement, but also because she felt a tremendous sense of loyalty to him.

A year drifted by. At seventeen, Suzette’s early promise of beauty was fulfilling itself, and she was strikingly beautiful. On one occasion when he had heard her sing, du Pont took Madame von Wagenstrate aside. ‘Anna,’ he said, ‘it is time that we took our little protégée out into the world. We must develop her dress sense, and show her how to use cosmetics. Teach her how to carry herself well, both on and off the stage. I think she will be ready for her début when she is twenty-one or so.

Because of her family’s poverty, Suzette had been painfully shy, but with her education and the money now being spent on her, her personality also unfolded. She became warm and friendly. Her gentleness did not desert her, but she no longer feared to meet people.

Suzette sometimes went with Madame von Wagenstrate to see some of the Paris couturier collections, and to her delight and astonishment, Madame took her in the off-season to buy clothes at special prices. One or two of the famous houses did this as a favour to Madame von Wagenstrate, and Suzette was slim enough to wear most of their model-worn garments, with only slight alterations.

Languages were not forgotten in her education. She studied Italian, German and English, and was also given dramatic coaching. Madame von Wagenstrate and du Pont were astonished to find that their protégée was a fine dramatic actress—a latent talent they had not suspected of her.

‘If she ever loses her voice,’ confided Madame, ‘she could

well repay the money you have spent on her by becoming an actress. With her beauty she could make a name for herself in films.'

Etien looked towards the other end of the room where Suzette, out of earshot, was sorting through some scores on the piano with Jean-Paul Lamont. The accompanist, not realizing he was being observed, was watching Suzette intently. With a shock, Etien realized that she was no longer a child, but a beautiful, very desirable woman. He turned back to Madame.

'How old is Suzette?' he asked abruptly.

'She is eighteen next birthday.'

'Is there no young man in her life?'

Madame shrugged. 'She has enough admirers, but nothing serious. Sometimes young men do call for her to take her home.'

'It would be a pity if she became involved with someone who might handicap her career. Marriage is a distraction for a star. The only way to success is complete and utter devotion to the job. It must come first—before everything.'

Suzette and Lamont were laughing at some small joke of their own. On an impulse, du Pont walked across the room: his footsteps had a resonant, compelling quality on the polished parquet floor. Suzette turned to look at him.

Du Pont took her by the hand, and drew her away from Lamont, who watched them with some curiosity as they walked across the room.

'Suzette, I want you to dine with me tonight.'

'At what time?' she asked. 'I will have to tell mother that I shall not be home.'

Etien himself was bewildered at his impulse to get to know Suzette better. If anyone had asked him the reason, he would have said 'I am guarding a valuable possession in which I have invested a lot of money.' But deep down he knew that it was not money alone, but a desire to protect Suzette and guard her—for himself?

Etien du Pont had never married. As a young man he had been in love with a famous opera star fifteen years older than

he. He had adored her. She had alternately spoiled, teased and tantalized him. When he had begged her to marry him, she had laughed in his face and called him a silly boy. This affair, which had drawn from him every emotion from jealousy to ecstasy, had gone on for six weary years. He had himself ended it by becoming interested in a writer, whose detached, impersonal sensuality he found a positive relaxation after his previous turbulent affair.

Others had followed the writer, and then he started to become famous and successful. He had an inherent distrust of women, and marriage seemed to him a trap to be avoided at all costs. Important women, greedy women, beautiful women—all fell in love with him, or so they said. Was it to further their career?—or was it for him alone? It may have been attraction for the unattainable.

In the expensive restaurant Etien waited impatiently for Suzette to arrive. It was not that she was ten minutes late, but that he was ten minutes early. Sophisticate that he was, he felt an unusual eagerness to see the young girl. Under the dim light of the softly glittering chandeliers sat the rich and famous, carefully coiffured and gowned. The air was filled with the rich aroma of costly perfume and expensive cigars.

Exactly at eight, Suzette made her entrance. And, indeed, it was an entrance. The buzz of conversation died down as all eyes turned to look at her, then rose again excitedly.

‘Who is she?’ many people asked.

Etien stood up, and Suzette, who stood perfectly still near the doorway, looked towards him. Then she came forward, smiling, every eye following her; yet she seemed oblivious of the sensation she was causing.

He had wondered whether he should ask her to such a fashionable place, but he need not have worried. She was dressed in a black dress, severely plain but subtly cut, scooped low at the neckline to expose her white shoulders and slim neck. Her hair was long, well below her waist. It was thick, black, and lustrous, and she had it wound in a coronet round her head, almost in the shape of a fez, or the classical Burmese style of hairdress-

ing. Into the chignon she had pinned a white gardenia, a present from Madame von Wagenstrate only that morning. Madame had been to the theatre the evening before, and had stood the flower in a glass upon the mantelpiece. Suzette, coming in for her lesson, had admired its perfume and its delicate waxen beauty.

'What a beautiful flower!' she had cried. Her pleasure had been so genuine that Madame had given her the flower. It was Suzette's only ornament. She had no jewellery, no furs. Her simplicity was almost ostentatious.

Du Pont proudly took her hand and raised it to his lips. It was the first time that Suzette had ever had her hand kissed, and she was thrilled at the gesture. She had never been to quite such an exclusive restaurant as this even with Madame von Wagenstrate.

'You are the most beautiful woman here,' said Etien. It was not an original compliment, but he meant it, and indeed it was quite true. There was no one in the room with the same radiant quality, the same sparkle of freshness, as Suzette.

The maitre d'hotel himself brought the menu. Suzette asked Etien to order for her. She said, quite naturally which made it far more charming: 'I know nothing about good food. You order for us both.'

Etien had never probed into the mind of his protégée, and knew nothing of her early life. Now he started to question her, and the story of her bleak childhood gradually unfolded. It was so different from his own background of luxury. But at this moment Suzette's eyes were sparkling more brightly than the other sophisticated diners—it must have been a wonderland to her, a dream world.

After a pause in their conversation, she turned to him impulsively. 'Monsieur du Pont, how can I ever thank you for all you have done for me and my mother?'

His large hand closed over her small one, which trembled at his touch.

'You will become a famous singer. I will stake my reputation on that,' said du Pont. 'It is a reward for me to know that I will

be giving your voice to the world and make it a happier place. Besides, it makes me proud to know that my judgement has not been wrong.'

They were interrupted by the arrival of a paper seller. She wore a blue linen smock over her clothes, and from time to time she dragged up the linen garment to plunge her hand into the capacious pocket of her skirt for change. She glanced warily about her as she passed from table to table, for she knew she had no right to be in the restaurant. But she managed to reach their table before she could be turned out.

'Hitler marches into Austria!' she said to them. 'Read all about it.'

'Ah, that pig. He will lead u. into war yet.' Etien looked grave as he put his hand into his pocket. He took the paper and told the woman to keep the change.

They read the unhappy news together, their heads side by side.

'This means war,' said Etien. 'I wonder how long we have got before it flares up,' he muttered, more to himself than to Suzette. He turned to her.

'I have heard news, in a roundabout way, that my cousins in Berlin have been sent to a concentration camp.'

'But why?' she asked.

'For no other reason than that they are Jews. My grandfather was Jewish. Didn't you know?'

Suzette shook her head in bewilderment. The news meant nothing to her. Her family, with the exception of her aunt, were typical French agnostics, religion-less by chance rather than by intellectual reasoning.

'The time may come when it will be unsafe for me to travel to Germany,' said Etien.

'But you are a French citizen, surely?' said Suzette. 'I am, and that may help me a little, but perhaps for a Jew it is different. Even with the protection of his passport, he may find himself in real trouble.'

The magic had gone out of the meal. They left rather dejectedly, and Etien took her home. At the front door he kissed

her gently on the forehead. 'I have enjoyed being with you so much, my dear,' he said.

And it was true, He had quite forgotten his distrust of women, and felt a quiet, comfortable relationship with her, as he would with his mother or sister.

'Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?' he asked. 'Do you mind dining with an old man like me?' he added wistfully.

'Why, you are the most wonderful person in the world,' said Suzette. 'I can never repay you for all you have done for me. I enjoy being with you,' she said firmly.

He took her hands and raised them to his lips. This time it was not the token kiss that he had given her in the restaurant. 'Tomorrow, then, at the same time at Badaul.'

Suzette was too excited by the evening to sleep. Even the chilling news of the invasion of Austria could not dim her excitement. Her thoughts were all of Etien, and she felt irresistibly attracted to him.

She was late for her lesson the next morning, which was very unusual for her. Anna von Wagenstrate looked at her curiously, but Suzette said nothing and was soon completely engrossed in her lesson. She was learning a new operatic part, the role of Leonore in *Fidelio*, and as she sang she thought of Etien.

'That is much better,' said Madame. 'You have put more feeling into it than usual.'

Suzette was unusually impatient for the day's work to end. She hurried home, and told her mother, from whom she hid nothing, that she was going out again with Etien. Annette was anxious about her daughter's new relationship with him, but felt she had no right to advise or interfere.

Etien was already waiting for Suzette. He kissed her hand, and as their eyes met, it was as though they were seeing one another for the first time.

This time they met in the bar of the restaurant; the waiter would call them when their dinner was ready.

Etien had ordered the *specialité de la maison*. Suzette was in the same black dress and coat that she had worn the day

before, but now she wore a white chiffon scarf around her throat.

'Tell me, what have you been doing today?' he asked.

'I went, as usual, to Madame von Wagenstrate, and have started to learn a new role, that of Lakmé.'

'That is a role you will almost certainly sing.' Etien could well imagine her, graceful in a sari, as the warlike Nilakantha's daughter.

'You must never cut your hair, Suzette.' He raised his hand and gently touched her hair. She leaned towards him, and taking his hands she pressed it to her face. People were looking at them curiously, but they were oblivious of the stares.

'I have to go to Germany for a week,' said Etien suddenly.

'Oh no!' she cried, 'It is not safe, after what you told me yesterday. Please don't go—Etien.'

He had asked her to call him by his first name, but she was still unused to it.

'It is all right so far. They would not dare to do anything yet.'

The week of his absence passed slowly for Suzette, but at last the day came for his return. He called her at Madame von Wagenstrate's, and Suzette, starry eyed, took the call. When Suzette had put down the phone, Madame looked sadly at the young girl's radiant face.

'Suzette, my dear, I can see you are in love with Monsieur du Pont,' she said.

Suzette flushed, and cast her eyes downwards in an agony of embarrassment.

'He is a man of the world, my dear. Do not take him too seriously. Do not give your whole soul to him.' She did not mention giving the body. That, to her, was not so important as the giving of the mind and the imagination. Yet there was nothing she could do to stop the budding love affair—she could only warn Suzette, and even as she spoke to her, she knew it would be useless. Rarely can a human being give advice to another in such a situation.

'But at least,' thought Madame, 'she will remember my

words afterwards, and it will teach her to be wary of life and love.'

Suzette and Etien now saw each other every day when he was in Paris. He desired her, and knew that with another girl they would already have been in the midst of an affair. He knew that Suzette would not have refused—it was evident from the way she returned his kisses and caresses. So what was holding him back?

One day, his arms around her, he suddenly knew what had been at the back of his mind all the time.

They were in the country. Suzette sat under an elm tree with the sun making patterns on her face with the shadow of the leaves. She was combing her hair, which had come down as they embraced, and was winding it into a chignon. She held the hairpins in her mouth, taking them one by one to pin up the shining mass.

He made up his mind to tell her.

'Suzette, I love you. Will you marry me?'

Her eyes widened, but still she went on pinning her hair. He shook her gently by the shoulders.

'What do you say?'

'Ask me again,' she answered, as the last pin was put into place.

He looked puzzled.

'I want to hear you again,' she said. 'They are the most beautiful words in the world. I have dreamed a hundred times that you would say you loved me and ask me to be your wife. But I am no one at all—how can you want to marry me?'

'How can you want to marry me, Suzette? I am years older than you, and you have such a career before you. You will be the greatest singer of this generation, believe me.' He took her chin and turned her face towards him. 'We shall not marry for a year or two,' he said gravely. 'I want you to be very sure. You are still very young, and I am probably the first man who has seriously interested you. I want you to be sure that you are not influenced by my helping you—certainly I do not want you to marry me out of gratitude. You must put that out of your

mind. Even if we had not fallen in love, the arrangement we have is a shrewd investment on my part—your voice is unique.’

Suzette leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. Breathlessly, Etien held her at arm’s length.

‘We must go back to Paris,’ he said.

The next day Suzette sang as never before. Suddenly, in the middle of an aria, the telephone rang. Madame von Wagenseite went to answer it, a look of annoyance on her face. ‘Sometimes I would like to wrench this wretched instrument from the wall,’ she said.

Suzette and Lamont stopped simultaneously.

‘It is for you, Suzette.’

‘Hallo, darling,’ said Suzette. Madame could not disguise her disapproval. ‘Yes, yes. Seven-thirty at the usual place. Goodbye.’

At the end of the lesson, Lamont said goodbye and left the two women alone.

‘Suzette, have you thought of what I said the other day? I am a great admirer of Etien du Pont, but I know his faults, and I would say what I have said already to his face.’

Suzette looked at her teacher with self-confidence, very differently from the first time that the subject had been mentioned.

‘He has asked me to marry him, Madame.’

‘Etien has asked you to marry him?’ repeated Madame unbelievably. She paused. ‘My dear, I must congratulate you. You must be the first woman who has had a proposal of marriage from Etien. He has many good qualities, and is warm and generous. You will make a wonderful pair.’

‘We are not going to be married until I am a little older,’ said Suzette. ‘At least, we are going to wait a year. He wants me to be sure that I am not carried away by any sense of duty to him.’

‘That is typical of him—not to take advantage of you in such a serious matter as marriage.’

‘Of course, I am grateful to him,’ said Suzette. ‘It would be most ungracious of me if I were not.’

'Can you imagine how you would feel if you knew him as a man who had nothing to do with music?' asked Madame.

'But that is one of the reasons why we do love one another. We have so much in common.'

'Then imagine that he had never helped you in any way; that you had met in ordinary circumstances.'

Suzette tried to imagine an Etien to whom she owed nothing. It was impossible.

'I don't think it matters whether you love a person out of a sense of gratitude,' said her mother later on, when Suzette recounted the conversation. 'Why try to give reasons for love?'

She had met Etien perhaps half-a-dozen times. He was about her own age; it was somehow reassuring to know that her daughter's life was in such capable, responsible hands. The next time she met Etien, he asked her what she thought of the proposed marriage.

'I am delighted,' she said.

'You must not think that Suzette owes me anything,' he said, eager as always to be accepted for himself alone.

'She loves you,' said Annette. 'How could she help it—you are so good to her.'

'I must still give her time to make up her mind,' he said. 'I don't want to rush her into a marriage that she may regret. I am partly Jewish, as you know, and that is another thing which worries me. I may put Suzette into danger by our marriage.'

'But isn't that being over-pessimistic? You are not going to Germany to live, and you will surely live most of the time in Paris.'

Etien's eyes had a dreamy, other-worldly expression. It was almost as if his Jewish ancestors were trying to give him a gift of prophecy; as though they were trying to draw back the veil between the present and the future.

'We shall, of course, make Paris our home. But there will be war, I am sure of it, in spite of Chamberlain and Deladier. Who can believe Hitler and Mussolini? We are dealing with bandits—with opportunists—men without honour. We are fooling

ourselves if we think we can make a deal with the devil and expect him to keep it.'

'But surely no one would be mad enough to risk a war which could destroy civilization?'

Etien shrugged. They both remembered the 1914-18 war. The thought of the utter futility of war left them silent.

'Yes,' thought Etien, 'she is right, it is inconceivable that even Hitler would be mad enough to go that far.'

Just then, Suzette came into the room.

'Why so solemn?' she asked them.

'We were talking politics,' said her mother.

Suzette wrinkled her nose in disapproval. 'No wonder you look so depressed,' she said.

There was an air of tension everywhere. A sort of mad gaiety, as though the people knew they were living on a volcano which might erupt and destroy the world they knew. Everything was prosperous as never before but now and then some particularly violent speech of the man with the comedian's little moustache would sober them all.

Hitler had risen from obscurity. He wore a shabby raincoat and looked like any other impoverished street-corner speaker. The only difference was in his voice, and the tormented, twisted brain. But it was mainly the voice. It had the penetrating, maddening quality of a dentist's drill. It drove the listener crazy, and filled him with hatred for others. The voice spread a doctrine which was illogical, unscientific; but because of its hypnotic quality, it was believed.

The Junkers, who had established Hitler and helped him to power, hoping to control him as a puppet, found that they had created a Frankenstein monster. It was impossible to guide him in any way. He was one of the most dangerous species of politicians—those who believe in every word they say. His appeal to the uneducated masses was overwhelming, and the intellectuals who had treated Hitler as a joke, suddenly found themselves fighting for their very existence.

All these events gave Suzette and Etien a strong sense of insecurity.

Suzette wore Etien's engagement ring—a marquise cut diamond which had belonged to his mother, and she longed to be married as quickly as possible.

'Etien,' she asked him, 'why should we wait to get married? We love one another. There is no earthly reason why we should hesitate. I know I am young, but you can trust me not to change my mind.'

Etien was tempted almost beyond endurance by her entreaties. Suzette pleaded, sometimes even wept, and it was hard to resist. Sometimes, quite unjustly, she accused him of not wanting to marry her at all. For such a young girl, she had an extraordinary instinct for persuasion. Etien himself was not entirely sure why he did not want to marry straight away. He loved and desired Suzette. She was even more desirable than before, but something held him back. It was not even that he felt himself pursued, and resisted the loss of his freedom.

It was August 28th, 1939. Etien was due to go to Poland to arrange for the production of *La Traviata*, and they were dining together on his last evening. Suzette had never looked lovelier. In the soft and flattering light of the restaurant her white dress had a pearly, luminous quality, and made an enchanting contrast with her jet black hair.

'I have news for you,' said Etien. 'We have a very important date to fix.'

'What is that?' asked Suzette.

'Surely you can guess?'

'Is it . . .?' she hesitated.

'When I come back from Poland,' he said, 'I want us to be married.'

They kissed, lingeringly, and the other diners looked on, entranced. The French are always kind to lovers.

'Do you really have to go to Poland?' asked Suzette. The German propaganda campaign against the Poles had started only a few weeks before. On August 18th a German-Soviet pact had been signed. There was something sinister in the order of events.

'I must go, my dear. If we give way to fear and panic, all life

will stop—which is exactly what the Nazis want. I shall be back in two weeks—think of it, only fourteen days and then we shall never be parted again. It is almost time for your début, and from now on my career will be husband and manager to you, to the exclusion of everything else. I cannot bear our being parted. We shall live happily ever after, so long as we can be together.'

Suzette told her mother and Mademoiselle Herge the good news. Mademoiselle sighed happily, and said with fond envy, 'You lucky, lucky girl.'

Chapter Four

SUZETTE would never forget those days which followed. Was it imagination, or were there many more people in uniform in the streets of Paris?

She went to her lessons as usual, and she bought a wedding dress. She and Etien had decided to be married in a Registry Office. It would be a quiet wedding because of the serious international situation. With his kindly generosity, Etien had left money for a dress for Suzette's mother and old Mademoiselle Herge. Mademoiselle had a small allowance, but she could not really afford to buy new clothes. Luckily, her employer had left her a whole wardrobe of clothes, but as she was such a different shape she had to spend many of her afternoons altering them to her own rather dumpy dimensions. But now one would almost have thought it was Mademoiselle Herge's wedding instead of Suzette's. The old lady spent hours of pleasure deciding what colour and style of dress she would buy.

On August 31st, the British fleet mobilized.

Lamont said, 'This must be it.'

Madame von Wagenstrate and Suzette disagreed with him, 'No one would be mad enough to have war. Even Hitler could not be so suicidal. He is bluffing.'

On September 1st Poland was invaded by Germany. Suzette was frantic. Great Britain and France were mobilizing.

One morning, Lamont did not arrive at the studio as usual.

'Where is Jean-Paul?' asked Suzette.

'He has been called up,' answered her teacher. 'Have you had news from Etien?'

'Not a word,' said Suzette. 'Just one postcard the day after he left. It had just five words on it—"Don't worry. I love you." It was unsigned.'

'He will be back tonight,' said Madame, not very convincingly.

Suzette looked at her, bleak tragedy in her enormous eyes. Within the last few hours she seemed to have become thin, angular.

'I will never see him again,' she said brokenly.

'Don't say that, my dear.' Madame von Wagenstrate, usually so self-possessed, started to cry. Suzette patted her shoulder. Madame was thinking of the last war, and how she had lost the man she loved through the senseless stupidity of destruction. Those terrible years between 1914 and 1918 had taken a whole generation of brilliant young people, and many had been sacrificed in their most creative years.

She and Suzette could not bring themselves to sing. They went out into the street instead, and wandered aimlessly in the direction of the Arc de Triomphe. It seemed that the whole of Paris had the same urge, to break away from the normal routine of living. The Arc was like a gigantic magnet. The little flame which burned in honour of the unknown soldier was almost satirical in its symbolism.

On September 3rd the British declared war on Germany. Suzette and Madame von Wagenstrate heard it on the radio, with Madame's two servants in the room with them. People had drawn close together within the last twenty-four hours, with the instinct of the herd to keep close together in times of danger.

'So it is war, after all.' Suzette shivered. Oh, where was Etien? The uncertainty of not knowing what was going on was worse than to have heard bad news.

'We shall almost certainly do the same,' said Jacques, the

manservant. 'We cannot possibly keep out if Britain is involved.'

Both Jacques' wife and Suzette maintained that perhaps Hitler would, even now, climb down.

'Not a hope of it,' said Madame von Wagenstrate, 'it is war.'

It was impossible to work seriously, though Madame and Suzette did try to carry on normally. The thought crossed Suzette's mind that it might very well be the last lesson she would have from her teacher.

Madame played the piano a little, but her accompaniment was a hit and miss affair compared with Lamont's. Later, Suzette said 'I must get a job straight away. Tell me, how do I go about it?'

Madame von Wagenstrate did not argue with her. The girl was fully trained now, and it would be good for her to have an audience—it might even take her mind off the absence of Etien.

'I will give you introductions to two or three people,' she said. She sat down at one of the little gilt sofa tables, took three or four visiting cards from her handbag, and scribbled an introduction on each.

'Go this morning,' she advised, 'and take some music with you, my dear.' Suzette took several scores, and they kissed goodbye.

Suzette first sought out the manager of the Café Napoleon, a large and fashionable nightclub. Madame had also given her addresses of the directors of two opera companies, but Suzette could not bear the thought of working in a theatre—it would have reminded her too much of Etien.

At the café Suzette found the manager near to distraction. The place was in a turmoil. Three Italian waiters had given their notice, and the place was understaffed.

Suzette gave him the card. 'I cannot hear you sing now, my child,' said the manager.

Suzette caught hold of his arm. 'Please, I beg you, Monsieur. It is not only the work which I need, but my fiancé is in Poland.'

The manager softened. It was a time when good deeds were done, before personal crises had become commonplace.

'What will you sing?' he asked, and Suzette, inspired, said *La Marseillaise*.

She climbed on to the small stage. Jerard, the bandleader, who had come in to ask whether they would be opening that night, followed her. 'I will play for you,' he said.

They struck up *La Marseillaise* together. At the first chord, the old charwoman who had been on her knees scrubbing, the agitated waiters, the manager himself who had been deep in conversation with his maitre d'hotel, looked up at the stage. Suzette began to sing. Her voice filled the room, stirringly, and as she sang she began to weep. Suddenly, they all rose to their feet and joined in the last chorus with her. There was not a dry eye in the place. They clapped and stamped. Then the song was finished, and the manager helped Suzette down the steps. Everyone clamoured around her, some embracing her, and all still overwhelmed with the emotions she had aroused with her singing.

There was no need to ask whether she had the job—it was obvious that the manager would now have used physical force to stop her from working elsewhere.

'You had better start rehearsing with Jerard and the orchestra for an hour or so,' said Bertrand. 'We start work at nine.'

Suzette had some coffee and a sandwich before rehearsals. She told Jerard what she would like to sing, and gave him the music she had brought with her. They sent out a messenger to buy the scores for the band.

'We have all of us been able to play these pieces at one time or another,' said Jerard, 'and it will be refreshing to go back to some classical music after all these years.'

When Suzette reached home, Annette and Mademoiselle Herge were waiting for her.

'Have you heard the news?' asked Annette. 'The English have declared war on Germany. If only Etien were here. It is terribly worrying to know what we should do. Do you think the Germans will invade France?'

'How do I know, Mother darling,' answered Suzette wearily. 'I have news also, news closer to home. I have taken a job. Madame von Wagenstrate thought that I was ready to start work. It is not the *début* we all imagined, but at least it will be money coming in for us.'

Suzette was a little worried about the financial situation. Her allowance from Etien was on a once-a-month basis, but if he had disappeared perhaps he might not have left instructions for further payments. When he had gone away before he had always written to her or telephoned her frequently. She was determined in any case that neither her mother nor Mademoiselle Herge should have to leave the flat. Mademoiselle paid her way, but she also had benefited from their new affluence.

'Where is the job, and what do you have to do?' asked Annette.

'I am so lucky,' said Suzette. 'I have managed to find work with the cabaret of the Café Napoleon.' She said it cheerfully, trying to disguise from her mother the uncertainty and disappointment at not continuing with Madame von Wagenstrate. 'In a way it was just as well that I had to make the change,' she thought to herself. 'There comes a time when lessons have to cease and one is on one's own.'

'Do you think Etien will mind you singing in a nightclub?' asked Mademoiselle.

'I don't think he will mind,' answered Suzette. She knew, in fact, that Etien would understand—he always did when other people's hopes and problems were concerned.

The fifteen members of the orchestra had drifted in and were studying their new scores. Jerard tapped on his music stand and they started to play. Suzette had chosen *O Silver Moon!* from Dvorák's *Rusalka*. She found the hard work made Etien's disappearance a little more bearable.

At 3.30 the rehearsal was finished, and Suzette hurried home to the apartment. It was 4.15 before she arrived home. Everything was crowded, the streets, the metro, the shops. Perfect strangers spoke to one another, commenting on the news. One

old man, Suzette noticed, had brought out his old medals and wore them proudly on his chest.

Suzette first had a hot bath—it was one of the luxuries she so much enjoyed. After her bath she came into the sitting room just in time to hear the news on the radio—as from five o'clock France had been at war with Germany.

'So it has come at last. If only there was some news from Etien.' Mademoiselle and Annette sat close together, looking old and rather pathetic. What had started out as a landlady and tenant relationship had turned into almost a family affair. The two women, both without close relations and too poor for many friends, had found a happy companionship built on respect.

It crossed Suzette's mind that she had changed places with her mother. She was now the one who would have to protect and support the other two. It had really been like that for years, but she had not realized it when Etien had been at her side. She, in turn, had leaned on him. Suzette suddenly felt older than her years. She squared her shoulders.

'War or no war, Mother,' I must rest now,' she said. 'Please wake me at 7.30, for I must start work at nine.'

The Café Napoleon was over-crowded. The manager had wondered in the morning whether he should close or not. He had imagined there would not be any celebrating, but he was quite wrong. There was a frantic gaiety, as though everyone expected to be swept off the earth before the night was over. There were young couples obviously having farewell parties: the young men, in brand new uniforms, occasionally eased their collars with a finger as though unaccustomed to the rough material.

Suzette had chosen a white dress for her first performance. Etien had once said to her that she looked incredibly beautiful when her hair was down. So tonight, instead of her usual chignon, she wore her hair loose and long, hanging below her waist. The heavy black mass of hair was a striking contrast to the severely plain white dress. She was an instant sensation. The usual unmannerly noise which goes on during a nightclub

act was immediately hushed. People stopped talking, eating and flirting to listen to her. Her whole performance was unique. To hear opera sung in this setting, by a girl of dazzling beauty, was startlingly original.

The manager had not known whether engaging Suzette would prove to be a success. After her audition he wondered doubtfully whether she would be suitable in cabaret. The morning's performance had been so emotional—perhaps it had clouded his judgement? But now his doubts were gone. 'I have a winner,' he thought to himself, 'this girl is a star.'

The audience called for encore after encore. The manager hurried up to Suzette, and whispered something to her. She turned to the bandleader and passed the message on: *La Marseillaise*.

In the morning Suzette's audience had consisted of the Café Napoleon employees. The anthem had brought them to their feet, and it did the same now. There was dead silence, then first one, then another, sprang to their feet and joined with Suzette in the rousing words of their National Anthem. Many openly dabbed their eyes. Suzette was asked by several people to join them at their table, but she refused politely and left for home.

There were, as yet, no transport difficulties. It was too late to risk going through the streets alone, so she took a cab. She arrived home utterly drained of energy, and yet she could not sleep once she was in bed. Over and over again her thoughts returned to Etien. Where was he? What had happened to him?

The next morning Suzette telephoned Madame von Wagenstrate to tell her the news about the job.

'Congratulations. I knew you could do it. Still no news of Etien?'

'Not a word,' said Suzette.

Four days later, Suzette was just about to leave the apartment. She was already dressed to go out, and her hand was actually on the door knob, when the telephone shrilled. She

raced back into the living room, convinced that it must be Etien. Her mother had answered the phone.

'Mademoiselle Bois?' her mother echoed, and then, seeing Suzette, she said, 'She is here.'

Suzette took the telephone. 'This is Monsieur Viscognet speaking, of Viscognet Frères, lawyers to Etien du Pont. Can you come to see us?'

'What news is there? Have you heard from him?' The blood drained from her face, and she held the instrument tightly as though she expected it to drop from her nerveless fingers. 'Have you heard from him?'

The voice was guarded, but kindly. 'We will discuss it when you come here.'

'I will come now,' said Suzette. To her mother as she left the apartment, she said: 'Please call the Café Napoleon and tell the manager that I am delayed. That I am expecting news of my fiancé, and have to go to his lawyer.'

Her mother embraced her.

Suzette hurried to the offices of Viscognet Frères. They were in a magnificent old house, where the gigantic rooms had been partitioned off into offices. In the waiting room Suzette sat on one of the black leather chairs, awaiting Monsieur Viscognet. His secretary asked for her name.

'Ah, yes,' she said. Her glance was curious, and yet mixed with sympathy. Suzette looked back upon the two minute wait before she saw the lawyer as one of the most dreadful periods of her life. Time seemed to stand still in the agony of suspense.

The secretary came back. 'Follow me, Mademoiselle Bois,' she said.

Suzette was ushered into a large office, which had an oppressive smell of law books and old briefs. The lawyer indicated the chair in front of him. He had brown eyes which gazed at her penetratingly from beneath heavy eyebrows.

'Have you no news of Etien du Pont?' he asked. Suzette shook her head dumbly.

'I have just received news through the Red Cross,' the lawyer continued. 'The story will be in the evening papers.'

He paused, and sought for words to lighten the blow he had to inflict on the gentle and beautiful creature who sat opposite him. But there was no way except the direct one.

'He was killed by a group of Nazi bullies. The S.S. had come to the opera house to arrest him. He and Herr Erlich were coming down the steps, when they barred his way. He argued that they had no right to arrest him, and fought back as they tried to drag him away. A gang of Nazi youths crowded round him, and one of them knifed him. The news was kept back, and we only heard of it today from an eye witness who works for the International Red Cross.

'Erlich tried to defend du Pont, but he was injured and knocked unconscious. When he came to in hospital his first concern was for du Pont, and it was he who sought out the Red Cross and found the eye witness. Erlich was born in Berlin,' added the lawyer drily, 'he is one of the Herrenvolk, but he risked his life to save his Jewish friend from death. If only the politicians would think of spreading love instead of hatred.'

Suzette sat quietly opposite the lawyer with the tears streaming down her face. 'Are you sure it was Etien?' she asked at last. 'Could the man who was killed possibly have been anyone else?'

'I am sorry, my dear, it is impossible. I managed to get in touch with a firm of lawyers in Warsaw, because of the legal aspects. They have confirmed the unhappy news.'

'The legal aspect?' faltered Suzette.

'Yes, there is an estate, you know. There is property in Germany, but some of du Pont's investments included stocks and shares. Four weeks before he left for Warsaw he altered his will, and left the bulk of his estate to you, for he had no close relations. The rest goes to an old manservant who worked for his family. The stocks and shares will bring you in more than you had from your allowance. There is also a bank account in the United States, as well as some jewellery.'

Viscognet stopped talking. He realized from Suzette's distraught expression that she had heard nothing. Her grief deeply touched him; although as a lawyer he was used to see-

ing displays of sorrow, both genuine and otherwise, Suzette's show of emotion was singularly moving. It was not only the pure despair of a woman who has lost the man she expected to marry; there was also something of a bereaved animal grieving for its master.

The lawyer got up from his desk and patted Suzette kindly on the shoulder. She started at his touch, and looked up at him with her enormous grief-stricken eyes. She had a small Belgian lace handkerchief in her hand. It was rolled into a little tear-soaked ball. She stuffed it into her handbag now, and pulled out a powder compact, glanced at her ravaged face in its small mirror, and automatically powdered her nose.

She stood up. 'I begged him not to go,' she said at last. 'I knew that something would happen to him.'

Viscognet escorted her to the street, and found her a cab. 'Go home,' he said, 'and rest a little.'

Suzette shook her head. 'I have a job, Monsieur. I have to go to it.'

Suzette arrived late at the Café Napoleon. Monsieur Bertrand was worried and annoyed at her absence, as they were to rehearse a new number. He was used to his women stars allowing their private lives to interfere with their work, but Suzette was always punctual for rehearsal. Was this the beginning of the usual pattern?

'Why are you late?' he asked Suzette severely. She was unprepared for the abrupt question.

'Etien du Pont has been murdered,' she whispered. She turned away and ran from the room, crying, but came back after a few minutes, having bathed her eyes with cold water. Monsieur Bertrand was horror-stricken.

'Would you like to go home for today?' he said, 'We can manage without the cabaret for this evening.'

Suzette shook her head. 'No, I will go on,' she said.

Jerard mumbled his sympathy. The band, usually so lively, was strangely hushed. They could not bear to look at her. They concentrated on their music, and kept their eyes averted.

Suzette had acquired such a fine singing technique that it

could overcome her grief. Another performer might not have been able to carry on. At last, rehearsals were over, and Suzette returned to the apartment. Her mother and Mademoiselle Herge were waiting for her, and seeing her face they instinctively knew the worst.

When Suzette left her food untouched, her mother did not try to persuade her. Mademoiselle Herge had left mother and daughter alone. As Suzette left for the evening's performance and passed Mademoiselle's door, she could hear the muffled sound of the old woman's sobs.

That night Suzette's performance was inspired. No-one looking at the beautiful young girl would have known of her bitter sorrow.

Day after day passed in an unreal rhythm of detached hectic gaiety. The clientele of the Café Napoleon gave many parties—farewell parties, engagement parties, parties for their own sake. Escapist merriment to forget the horror and fear of war.

Russia had mobilized on September 8. On the 11th, British troops were already on French soil. There were British uniforms amongst the French at many of the tables. Suzette had learned to speak English, for Etien had insisted on languages as part of her training. Many of the young British officers had never been to Paris, and she would sometimes speak a few words to them after her performance.

One evening, a group of people in British uniform invited her to join them. 'We are especially interested in your voice,' said one. 'You see, we are also entertainers—members of Ensa. Too bad the war is on, he continued, 'you would be singing in opera.'

'That was my intention,' said Suzette, 'but now . . .' She shrugged. 'How mad, how senseless it all is. Why did we allow this monstrous little man to dominate our life? Why couldn't the Big Powers have destroyed him earlier? Why couldn't the Americans have lent us a gangster to assassinate him for a few million dollars? It will cost us far more in the end.'

'I am afraid it is our fault,' said a girl in the party. 'If it had not been for Chamberlain . . .'

Suzette interrupted her. 'The temptation to trust was too great for him. Who would not have been tempted to believe what they wanted to believe?'

'Perhaps so.'

'And now,' said Suzette, 'where are you going after Paris? Or are you working here?'

They looked uneasily at one another. Then a young man said slowly: 'We have been told we are leaving soon—that is why we are having a party. We have news,' he said, 'that the Germans are advancing on France.'

'Surely not!' cried Suzette. 'Can't we drive them back?'

The thought of the Germans, who had killed Etien, occupying France was hateful. Suddenly she was awakened from the apathy of her sorrow, which had numbed her to everything but her job.

'Tell me,' she said earnestly to the young man at her side. 'Could I join Ensa? Does one have to be British?'

'I am sure you would be welcome,' said the young man. 'But are you sure you want to? You will not earn very much money.'

'Money does not matter,' said Suzette. She had freedom of movement now, due to her inheritance from Etien. 'How do I set about it?'

'The best way is to go to the British Embassy. They will, of course, have to interview you.'

'I would have to take my mother and her companion,' said Suzette. She had decided that they could never abandon old Mademoiselle Herge. It would be much easier to say that she was her mother's companion than her mother's lodger. Although she had not asked the old lady whether she would move with them, there was no doubt in Suzette's mind that she would accept eagerly.

Suzette said goodbye to her new friends. At home, her mother and Mademoiselle Herge, dressed in a thick, blanket-like dressing gown, were still up. Suzette came straight to the point, over the hot chocolate which her mother had made.

'Mother, I want us to leave Paris—all of us,' she said.

'Why, dear?' asked Mademoiselle. 'Do you think we will be safer in the country?'

Suzette shook her head. 'We shall not be safe in France. We must leave immediately.'

'But how can we?' asked her mother. 'It would take weeks of packing.'

'We must leave everything which is not essential,' Suzette said. 'Get ready to pack. Tomorrow I am giving notice to Monsieur Bertrand. I am going to try and get into Ensa, but whether they will take me or not, we are leaving.'

'But they will hold on to Paris,' said Mademoiselle.

'I don't think they will be able to,' Suzette replied.

The next day was April 30th. Suzette hurried to the British Embassy as her first job of the day. She had an introduction to the Ambassador for, fortunately, she had remembered that Monsieur Viscognet had a niece working at the Embassy. The Ambassador was very busy, but he gave her five minutes. He then handed her over to his First Secretary, and Suzette came straight to the point. 'Can I rely on you to get me visas for three people?'

'Certainly,' said the young man.

Viscognet often did business with the British Embassy, and was personally known to the Ambassador—he had already spoken to him of Suzette. Everyone in diplomatic circles was well aware of the imminent danger which overhung France.

The lawyer had also promised Suzette that he would use his influence to get passports for them as soon as possible.

The refugees from Holland and Belgium had already started to trickle into Paris, but not yet the teeming thousands who were later to block the roads under continuous machine gun fire from the air.

Suzette intended to get an audition with Ensa on her arrival in England.

At last, armed with visas and tickets for the journey, she arrived back home. Her mother and Mademoiselle Herge had been packing

'I am so looking forward to going,' said Mademoiselle, 'and

maybe I will be able to be of service to your dear mother. I have not forgotten how to speak English.'

Annette Bois had never been out of France, and was as excited as a child going to its first birthday party. The next two days they were busy with innumerable details, and making arrangements to let the flat. Incredibly, Suzette managed to find a tenant, who was to move in the day after they left.

She had to say goodbye to Jerard, Bernard and Madame von Wagenstrate, who was also in the midst of packing.

'I am going to leave here,' she said, 'and stay with my sister in the south of France. The news is very bad. I am afraid we are going to have a much longer war than we thought.'

The furniture was being carefully lifted into packing cases specially built for the purpose. Madame's furniture was valuable.

'I will have to store everything until the end of the war,' she said, 'unless I manage to find a house reasonably near my sister. But I am sure she will not allow me to live alone. Let me hear from you, Suzette, and look after yourself. I am so happy that you are taking Mademoiselle Herge with you.'

The studio already had a derelict look. On the pale paint of the walls were the ghostly outlines of where different pieces of furniture had stood. The curtains, now being taken down by three workmen, were faded in streaks. It was funny, thought Suzette, how when everything was in place, one had not seen the imperfections. It was like seeing someone you knew very well without make-up for the first time.

Once more outside her flat, she looked up at the house where she had spent so many years, where Etien had so often called for her. She felt a lump in her throat. She was deliberately obliterating part of her life. Some instinct compelled her to leave France. Quite apart from the news, she could picture vividly the sight of the Germans advancing. They must be driven back in the end, she thought to herself, but even so, she would never tolerate living under a system which had murdered Etien.

Chapter Five

SUZETTE had been working a few months for Ensa when, on June 14th, Paris was captured by enemy forces. She had been performing in the north of England, and that very day had managed to come down to the south to visit her mother and Mademoiselle Herge.

It was strange how the war had given the two women a new lease of life. Suzette had been accepted by Ensa on their arrival in England, and had then installed them in a country cottage in a small village on the south coast.

Her mother, who had lived all her life in Paris, and much of it in a slum, had taken to country life immediately.

'It is like one long holiday,' she told Suzette. 'I would never have believed there were so many things to do in the country.'

Annette and Mademoiselle Herge were enthusiastic, if amateur, gardeners, and together they tended and watched over their small plants. Suzette had been worried that they might be lonely—they had few friends, though they knew the local shop keepers and the neighbours. But actually, the two women had more friends than they had in France. They had joined the Red Cross, and rolled bandages three times a week, as well as knitting continuously in the evenings.

They made many friends, and were often invited to meals with their neighbours. They gave little dinner parties, with

much success, as they could adapt their French cooking so well to the restrictions of rationing. Mademoiselle Herge often commented to Annette that she could make enough soup to feed a regiment with what their neighbours threw away. Food had not become so extremely short as later in the war, and the English had not learned the strict economy they acquired later.

Madame Bois and Mademoiselle Herge wanted to know all about Suzette's journey to the north of England. She told them about the enthusiastic reception of her performances, but did not mention the discomforts and the dreary cold of her lodgings.

She was delighted to hear their news—the two women were bubbling over with energy and contentment. Her mother, who had always seemed so negative, found in this new life a complete fulfilment.

'What is that garment you are knitting?' asked Suzette. It was a tubular, shapeless length of white wool, with an oily texture.

'They are sailor's stockings,' said her mother, with a laugh. 'This is my thirty-third pair,' she went on proudly, 'but of course, it is very thick wool.'

Mademoiselle Herge, not to be outdone, produced a half-finished khaki pullover. It was beautifully knitted.

'This is for one of our favourite Service girls,' she said, and kissed Suzette. 'It will be finished for Christmas.'

Suzette said: 'I have arranged to have some French books sent to you from London.'

'My dear, you shouldn't have done that,' said her mother. 'How well off are you now? I am sure you would never tell us, but I think you ought to.'

'There is no need to worry, Mother,' said Suzette. Etien had anticipated with remarkable foresight the possible financial complications. He had liquidated most of his European assets and invested most of his money in the States, and he had a few shares in Switzerland. 'If anything, my finances have never been better,' she said. 'Besides, I have my army pay.'

Suzette had changed. There was nothing shy about her now, and sorrow had taken away her girlish softness. She still wore

her great talent without self-consciousness, as a queen might wear a crown. She had had two or three love affairs, which had meant absolutely nothing to her. Proposals of marriage had followed these brief encounters, but Suzette could not bring herself to think of any man as a husband while Etien's memory was so dear.

Now and then, when the hectic excitement of wartime life calmed a little, she would remember Etien with a sharp pang and weep once more. But these unhappy moments occurred less and less, for her job kept her constantly on the move. She was too physically tired to have time for anything much except sleep. There was the constant packing and unpacking—the kisses and the farewells—the uncertainty and the fear of imminent death, which turned life into a nightmare.

In August, Suzette had a brief few days in London, where she had been called for an interview at Ensa headquarters. She was also appearing at Hammersmith, and every day she travelled by bus to the theatre it seemed that the driver would choose a new route. There was something frightening about this. The Londoners gazed glumly out of the bus windows at the pathetic ruins revealed by the harsh morning light. Houses would be sliced open with surrealistic effect—a macabre canvas of wallpapers, indicating vanished rooms and staircases, with perhaps a bath crazily hanging into space, its torn pipes somehow supporting it.

Every night, round about six, the enemy planes droned overhead. There was something ant-like, inhuman, in their regularity, and it was as though the enemy scorned to take their victims by surprise. It was a blatant display of force. Everyone's daily routine was altered, of course, but those who had jobs to do carried on in spite of the danger of shrapnel or bombing.

Most people adopted a fatalistic attitude. Suzette began to admire the English intensely—they alone had not given way to panic, and were fighting against what seemed to be insurmountable odds. People were cheerful about appalling hardships.

The day before she left for the country, a bomb had missed Suzette's house by less than a hundred feet. Glass from the broken window tinkled into her room, and Suzette, who had decided against going to the shelters, was choked with dust. She tried to turn on the electric light, but that had failed. Glass was everywhere, and but for her foresight in pulling the bed-clothes over her head, she would have been badly cut. She felt in the darkness for her torch. In the noise which followed the crash of the exploding bomb, it had been hard to guess what was happening. There was a gaping hole in the ceiling, rubble was everywhere. The dust overlaid everything like thick sand, and grit was still floating in the air. Suzette emptied her shoes and pulled on a dressing gown. She tugged away the tattered remnants of the black-out curtains to peer outside.

There were people shouting and running. She hurried downstairs. In the garden there was a dead dog, and a leafless tree was grotesquely decorated with someone's jacket, blown there by the blast. Further on, nearer to the explosion, was a human arm, a small wristwatch still on its wrist. Suzette turned her head away, and was sick. When she recovered, she went over to the air-raid wardens searching feverishly in the ruins.

'Can I help at all?' she asked.

'You could look after these people until the ambulance comes,' said one of the men. 'Here, Bill, have you got a tin hat for the lady?' he yelled. One was produced. There was a pathetic little group of people—an old woman, a boy of about seven, and a baby.

'Keep talking to them,' the warden whispered. 'The mother's disappeared. She's somewhere in there.'

Suzette took them back to the house, and settled them in the hall. The bombs were still falling, and the sky was alight with flak and the red glow from distant fires.

'I won't be able to see my daughter when she gets out,' protested the old woman, as Suzette tried to take her into the house.

'They will come and get you,' she said, 'they will let you know. She may even have been taken to hospital already.'

The old woman could not stop talking now. She told her story over and over again, as if it gave her some kind of physical relief.

'We were in the shelter,' she said. 'We heard a bomb whistle down. "That's a near one," said my daughter, and then the lights went out and there was a terrible crash. The ground was heaving. I couldn't move my left arm. I could hear little Chris crying, but I couldn't get to him. There was a beam across my shoulder. It seemed like hours that we were shut in there. I couldn't breathe because of the dust, and I kept praying out loud "Dear God, don't let us choke to death," and then the gentlemen came. I started to scream when I heard them digging. He said "It's all right, Mother, we'll have you out in half a jiff." They got me out first, then Chris, and then Johnnie.'

Suzette let the old woman talk; finally the ambulance came. The old woman had a cut on her shoulder—it was a superficial wound. but she was obviously suffering from shock. She and the children were taken off to hospital, and Suzette was left alone. She went back to her room, took her towel and soap, and walked along the corridor to the bathroom. She turned on the taps: there was no water. She was still twisting the taps, when there was a knock on the bathroom door. Mrs. Collier, the landlady, called through the door to her.

'The water mains have been hit,' she called.

Suzette unlocked the door. Mrs. Collier had just come back from the shelter. 'We were lucky last night,' she said. 'Were you in the house when it happened?' Suzette nodded.

'What was it like?'

Suzette described the terrible night. 'What a stupid business it all is,' she said finally. 'No one will win this war. Even if the Germans manage to invade us here, the destruction would impoverish everyone for years. The world will never be the same.'

Mrs. Collier gave her a saucepan, and she took her turn to queue up for water. The local authorities had installed a tap at the corner of the street, and there was a line of grey-faced people waiting patiently. They looked as if they had not had a

proper night's sleep for weeks. Their clothes were crumpled and grey, in the dawn light, like their faces.

Suzette washed in her room, and hurried to catch her train. It was unbelievably over-crowded. People were standing, even in the corridors. She was travelling to the west of England for her next appearance, and arriving there she found it like another country—so quiet and peaceful after London.

Suzette travelled all over England and Scotland. Her letters to her mother and Mademoiselle Herge told of the enthusiasm of her reception everywhere. Her mother and the old lady were delighted. They often heard Suzette on the radio, and would send congratulations on the amount of applause she received.

Suzette was now used to this exacting life, and she was not unhappy—it was rewarding to know that she was giving pleasure and the ability to forget, for a short while, the horrors of war. She had heard from headquarters that she had been chosen for service abroad, and was tremendously excited at the prospect. Life on the war-stricken island was often dreary, and even necessities were in short supply. It was almost like returning to the harsh dreariness of her childhood. 'If ever life becomes normal again,' thought Suzette, 'I shall cherish even the simplest luxuries.'

She was back in the north of England again. The company was having an impromptu party at the barracks, and Suzette had just finished singing, when a sergeant came into the crowded room. Suzette noticed him whispering to someone at the door, and then he and a captain looked around the room in search of someone. Their gaze fell on her. She could not say afterwards why she felt instantly uneasy. The noisy, smoke-filled room was over-crowded and there was no reason to feel alarm at seeing the stranger at the door. Perhaps it was just coincidence that they looked in her direction. But the two men pushed their way through the crowd of dancers and service men and women, either queueing at the bar or triumphantly carrying back drinks, and arrived at her side.

'You are Miss Bois?' asked the sergeant, as though he could not quite believe that his companion had told him the truth.

'Yes, I am Suzette Bois.'

'Please will you come with us?' he said. Suzette followed the two men, noticing idly that the captain needed a hair-cut. They walked out of the room, and into a small office.

'Sit down,' said the captain, 'We have just had a telegram and a telephone call simultaneously. I am afraid I have some bad news for you.'

The music from the bar could be heard faintly in the distance.

'What is it?' asked Suzette. Her first thought had been for her mother. She must be ill, perhaps in hospital. But she was not prepared for what came next.

'Mrs. Bois and Miss Herge have been killed.'

'Oh, no!' cried Suzette. The captain gripped her shoulder. 'I just heard from her yesterday . . . What happened? Why?'

'An enemy plane jettisoned its bombs before returning to base.'

'It was supposed to be a safe area,' said Suzette, tearless and stunned. In her mind she pictured the cottage with its thatched roof and low ceilings; its English garden, with its old-fashioned flowers, hollyhocks, rambler roses and lavender. She thought of Mademoiselle Herge and her mother with their knitting. A voice said, 'This is for one of our favourite Service girls,'—the voice of Mademoiselle as she showed the half-finished khaki pullover proudly to Suzette.

It was the thought of that pullover, and all the loving care that had gone into its making, which brought on her tears. She sobbed, and through her sobs she said, 'Why should two harmless old women be killed?'

'It was bad luck. It could have happened to anyone,' said the captain. 'The bombs were released at random—they were probably lightening the plane. They may have been afraid of pursuit from our chaps, or their craft may have been damaged. We don't know the details yet.'

Suzette held the unopened telegram in her hands. She tore it open now, and read it. It carried virtually the same news, but some kind and thoughtful person had added the words:

'Killed instantly.' So they had not suffered. They had died during a happy period in their lives, and that was some consolation.

The sergeant left the room quietly, and returned a few minutes later with a small glass of brandy. Suzette dried her eyes and thanked him. His inarticulate sympathy was strangely touching.

The next few days brought more details. Suzette, who had been given compassionate leave, went down to the village where her mother and the old lady had died. She sent a telegram to say that she was coming to the head of the Red Cross, who met her at the station with a clergyman and his wife. They took her to a little tea shop first before they went to her mother's last home. As they sat at the table eating the grey-looking bread and margarine sandwiches, Suzette turned to the grey-uniformed woman on her left. 'I must run through the effects—perhaps you could use them for the Red Cross.'

There was an awkward silence. The clergyman coughed. 'I am afraid there is nothing left,' he said gently.

'Nothing left?' echoed Suzette.

His wife explained, 'It was a direct hit, you see, Miss Bois. There is . . . nothing left.'

Suzette was stunned. It did not seem possible that her mother and Mademoiselle Herge could have disappeared with all their small belongings without a trace.

They stood up to go. 'I don't think I will come and see the cottage,' said Suzette. 'I prefer to remember it as it was.'

'Quite right, my dear,' said the clergyman, with a look of relief on his face.

'Would you like to stay the night with me?' asked the Red Cross worker. 'You are welcome.'

'If you don't mind, I think I'll go to London,' said Suzette. 'I have to go to headquarters.'

She caught the next train, which stopped at every station. She had been told that there was only one good train a day to London, but she felt that she must get away at all costs. The

memory was too painful to stay where Mademoiselle Herge and her mother had spent their last days.

If she had left them in Paris, perhaps they would have been better off, she thought miserably. And yet, no, they had been happier than ever before in these last few months, and they might even have been spared a great deal of misery. For if they had stayed in Paris, Mademoiselle Herge would have been penniless without her income from England, and her mother would have faced intimidation, or possibly worse, from the Gestapo. After all, she had a daughter with the English forces, and would have been instantly suspect.

In London, Suzette went to see Ensa. 'Do you think you could speed up my posting for abroad?' she asked. She explained what had happened to the sympathetic Personnel Officer.

'When are you leaving London?' he said.

'The day after tomorrow.'

'Come and see us tomorrow at eleven o'clock.'

Suzette paused on her way out. 'Please, I beg of you, do your best to send me abroad.'

She arrived for her appointment next day, and was shown into the office of Captain Smithers.

'I have good news for you,' he said. 'I am posting you with a company that is touring Egypt and the Middle East.'

'When shall I be transferred from my present unit?' she asked.

'We will have that done immediately.'

Suzette made one more journey to the north to get her baggage, and then one grey morning she clambered up the gangplank of a ship. The vessel had been a passenger liner in happier, more peaceful days. Now it was converted into a troop ship, and painted a dull steel grey. The ship was uncomfortably full. There were three battalions of the Norfolk Regiment aboard, one or two airmen, Suzette and three nursing sisters. The four women shared a cabin. One of the nursing sisters was travelling back to Cairo, the other two were going to Egypt for the first time. Maude Wilmott gave glowing

accounts of life in Egypt. The three girls listened from their bunks—there was no room even for a chair in the tiny cabin. As they hung on the words, it reminded Suzette vividly of a mother telling her children a fairy story.

One of the girls was too young to have known what normal adult life was like. To be in a place where there was no danger of air raids would have been a novelty to her.

The story was suddenly interrupted by the loud clanging of the alarm.

‘Air raid,’ said one of the nurses, leaping off her bunk and grabbing for a life belt which hung on hooks on the wall. The older nurse got up without excitement.

‘Better put them on,’ she said, ‘but don’t panic, it’s probably only drill.’

The girls struggled into their life jackets and went one by one up on deck. There was a fresh wind, but the sea was not rough. It was bitterly cold. The other ships of the convoy were signalling, and Suzette noticed that they were all changing course and swerving in different directions.

‘Is it drill?’ asked the nurse.

‘No, it’s the real thing,’ answered a sailor. ‘Two enemy planes ahead.’

The planes were out of sight behind some cloud. Suddenly, Suzette heard the murderous insect noise as they came in close to the convoy. The anti-aircraft guns of one of the ships to the left spluttered into life, and hit one of the planes when it was near enough for them all to see the black crosses painted beneath its wings.

It must have been a direct hit. Black smoke started to pour out of the plane and, suddenly, without warning it exploded. Another plane, which had been diving into the attack, was too late to change direction—the force of the explosion sent it spinning out of control, and it plunged straight into the sea.

Suzette was horror-stricken at the thought of the men trapped in the small craft, even though they had been attacking the convoy.

'How many aircraft are there?' asked the nurse, 'Do you know?'

'There were only two—probably coming home from a raid and couldn't resist annoying us.'

'Serves them right,' said one of the sailors.

'Yes, serve them right,' thought Suzette. After all, this was war, and it was their lives or somebody else's. There had been no reason why their convoy should have been picked out, but perhaps some ardent young Nazi had wanted to chalk up some more lives on the Fuehrer's bloody altar.

There were alarms nearly every day, but they were nearly all false. The others were routine drill. It was never wise to do the tedious exercise half-heartedly, for survival often depended on it.

The journey was interminable. What should have taken two weeks, took seven. They circled around and made constant detours. Many were seasick, but happily, Suzette and her companions were not. When she saw the rest of the ship she realized that, far from being crowded, they, as women, had more space than anyone else on the ship. The men were huddled together, claustrophobically close. The nights seemed even worse than the days, for the ships had to move across the water with the minimum of lighting. As they reached the warmer zone, it became unbearably stuffy and hot.

Suzette wondered at the good humour of the men. Although there was constant tension, there were relatively few quarrels. Even so, it was an explosive atmosphere.

At last, they reached Durban, and received a tremendous welcome. Total strangers took the weary travellers into their homes, and they were feted, wined and dined. Suzette, who had not sung for five weeks, now sang for her host and hostess, after she had spent a glorious day swimming and enjoying the African sunshine.

A few days later they continued their journey and, at last, they arrived in Egypt. It was almost as if they had arrived in another world. Although uniforms were very much in evidence, there seemed to be no shortages or hardships of any

kind. All sorts of fabulous Middle-East merchandise was there for the buying. When even the smallest purchase cost precious clothing coupons, to be able to buy at random was intoxicating. There was the tawdry and the shoddy in the bazaars, but also the rare and precious.

Suzette saw all the sights, from the mosques to the ancient Egyptian antiquities. 'Now,' she thought to herself, as she saw the Step Pyramid at the ancient capital of Memphis, 'I shall be able to sing *Aïda* with the right amount of feeling.'

The past was always evident. The ancient Egyptians seemed in many ways more modern and more highly civilized than their descendants. Was it imagination, she wondered, or did the present-day Egyptian seem almost jealous of his illustrious forebears?

Suzette spent a year-and-a-half in Egypt, and the memory of her bereavements became less hurtful. It was only on special occasions, perhaps a birthday or the New Year, that the wounds were once again raw and sensitive. It was then that she felt overwhelming loneliness.

She had many friends, men amongst them, but her heart was still free. It was almost as if she was afraid to love; almost as if she dared not give way to deeper feelings. And yet, life had its compensations. Wherever she sang, she had a sensational reception, all the more remarkable as she sang classical music. Usually, the Services preferred popular music. It was rather amusing, thought the commandant of Suzette's troupe, as she stood at the back of the hall. He heard two young soldiers groan as they read Suzette's item on the programme.

'That's when we'll go and get a beer,' said one to the other.

'I hate these old bags screeching in Italian,' said his friend. 'Remember the one we saw a few months ago? She looked like our sergeant major without a moustache.'

'Without a moustache?' echoed the other young man. 'The only difference was, she didn't wax the ends.'

The lights went low, and the first act started. After several dancing and popular music acts came Suzette. The stage went completely dark, and suddenly she was brilliantly spot-lighted.

It had been her own suggestion that her act should start in this way. She always thought of some unique presentation—something which was different from the others. The Americans later invented the word 'gimmick', but Suzette had used the gimmick before the word was even invented.

The young soldiers, who were just on their way out, had a change of heart when they saw her. They pushed their way back to their empty seats, and one of them whistled shrilly through his teeth. Suzette had a round of applause before she started, for several of the men had seen her perform at other camps. She sang *The Fairy Chorus* from the *Immortal Hour*, and followed up with an aria from *The Magic Flute*. The applause was tumultuous. She gave as an encore *Solveig's Song* from *Peer Gynt*. They still did not want her to go, but she finally made her last bow.

Other acts followed Suzette's, but they seemed an anticlimax compared with her dynamic talent and the professional finish of her performance.

The commandant of the troupe smiled to himself as he went backstage. He was more than a little in love with Suzette, and had been trying to persuade her to marry him. Her elusiveness added to her attraction, even as it held him at a distance. Suzette was beginning to find it rather tiresome.

When she got back that evening to her lodgings, there was an official army letter waiting for her. 'A posting,' she thought to herself, as she glanced at the envelope. She ripped it open. When she had read the letter a couple of times, and interpreted the official army jargon, the gist of it was that she should proceed to Persia. 'Teheran,' she repeated the word to herself. What pictures it conjured up.

Suzette said goodbye to her many friends in Cairo. The members of her Ensa troupe clubbed together and gave her a party on the night before she was due to sail. At the party she was repeatedly asked to sing, and finally, after the dinner, her voice soared in the song she had sung at the last concert. The people at the other tables had all stopped drinking to listen to her. When she had first got up, many of the newcomers to

Cairo had thought she was just some girl in a party. The commandant made a speech. He was a little drunk, and when he danced with Suzette he again begged her to marry him. She felt sad about refusing—it would have been wonderful to have someone of her own, but she could not accept him.

It is sometimes better to be alone than to commit oneself to the wrong person.

When she arrived back at the camp, she packed her belongings ready for the morning. Although she had been looking forward to the move, she remembered now, with a shudder, the extreme discomforts of travel in wartime. How could she have forgotten the overcrowding and the constant state of tension which she had endured for weeks? But then, she thought, that is life. It was always a case of giving up one thing to get another. If you wanted to get ahead, it sometimes meant going deliberately against one's self-interest.

Chapter Six

THE journey to Teheran had not been nearly as uncomfortable as that never-to-be-forgotten journey to Egypt.

She was surprised to find that Teheran was a city of well-paved streets. She had imagined a city of tents. Large, low-slung American cars passed along the shady streets, in continuous procession. Persians, sleek and well fed, like pampered house cats, promenaded along the pavements. The lofty buildings, dazzling white, had sunblinds drawn on their shop-fronts. The blinds did not completely hide the wealth of merchandise from the most luxurious cities of the world.

Suzette was installed in a room which had a small courtyard outside the window. It enchanted her. It had a small almond tree and a blue tiled pool. She had the courtyard almost to herself. In the room next door there was a young woman who worked as secretary in the French Embassy. On the rarer occasions when she and Suzette shared the courtyard they could converse in French and reminisce about Paris.

Suzette was an ardent sightseer, and often she just roamed in the city shop-gazing or looking into the gardens of the rich. Perhaps they were gardens of mosques—she could never be sure.

She was just peering into one such walled garden, which had

a square pool in the centre. The Persians were very fond of water. It represented life to them, as it does to all people who live in arid lands. Someone spoke to her in Persian. She turned away her gaze from the shimmering water in the direction of the voice.

Three men stood beside her. Obviously foreigners, from their colouring and clothes. The speaker was a few years older than Suzette, of middle height and slim. He had brown hair, high cheekbones and steady blue eyes.

Behind him the other two looked over his shoulder. One was a blond giant of a man, also with high cheekbones. He had slanting eyes of a very light colour, only slightly darker than his hair. Because of his fairness, he might have been taken for a Scandinavian, but at a second glance one realized that with darker colouring he could have been Oriental.

The third man was shorter than the other two. He had enormous shoulders, and a bullet-shaped head. It was pure muscle, not fat, which made him chunky. Such a man could have been carved out of a slab of granite.

They gazed at Suzette, but kept silent.

Suzette involuntarily answered the first man in French. 'I am so sorry, I do not speak Persian,' she said.

The man answered her in French. 'You look Persian,' he said. 'I am sorry, Mademoiselle, to disturb you, but I want to know how I get to the Great Bazaar.'

Suzette tried to explain, but it was not easy, for she knew none of the names of the streets. She started to laugh, and the man with blue eyes laughed with her. One of his companions shot a question to him in an unfamiliar language, and he answered in the same tongue. The other two smiled at the answer.

'Perhaps I could show you the way more easily than explaining' said Suzette.

'That would be most kind of you, but would it not be taking up too much of your time?'

'No,' said Suzette. 'I would like to visit the Great Bazaar again. I visited it only briefly—there is so much to see, but the

girl who went with me was not terribly interested, and wanted to get away quickly.'

'It would be most pleasant if you would come with us,' said the young man with quiet sincerity.

Suzette turned to him, and found herself blushing—she felt tremendously attracted to this stranger, although they had spoken only a few words to each other. She was intensely curious as to his nationality. Should she risk asking him, or would he and his friends be offended?

There was something about their manner, some reserve, which did not encourage questions. She could not analyse it, even to herself.

They walked along the pavement, jostled by the crowd. The man with blue eyes was walking at Suzette's side, conversing with her in French, and the other two were following behind, talking volubly.

Suzette listened, and out of the jumble of words one familiar sound was an oft-repeated 'da'. This word she recognized. So they were Russian. She knew there were a few Russians in Persia, but Russia was their traditional enemy and always had been. Although there was some sort of uneasy truce, they were still unpopular.

'How long have you been in Persia?' she asked. The frank blue eyes clouded briefly. A shutter seemed to mask their clarity for a moment, and then vanish.

'We are on leave,' said the young man. 'Our job is to transport vehicles and equipment through Persia.'

'So you are in the army?' said Suzette with interest. 'Where are you stationed? In Teheran or . . .' The man interrupted her, smilingly.

'I am Captain Serge Mirov of the Russian Army. We are on leave before our next convoy from Persia,' he said.

Suzette tried to control her expression of surprise. It was the first time she had met any Russians in Persia, and she still could hardly believe that they were now officially allies, instead of being with the hated enemy, the Nazis. The change-over had all come about so swiftly.

'I am Suzette Bois,' she said. 'I am attached to British Ensa, also stationed in Persia, but mostly in Teheran.'

Captain Mirov's eyes betrayed gladness at the news. 'You are an entertainer?'

'Yes, I am a singer,' answered Suzette. Without reserve, she started to tell him about herself. He asked a question here and there, and listened attentively.

Suzette had never before confided to anyone as she did to the young stranger. There was something in his manner which encouraged her to tell all her story. Afterwards she realized it must have been an enormous adventure for him to talk to someone from a non-Communist country. In spite of the fact that he spoke seven languages, it was almost pathetic that he knew so very little of other countries and their way of life.

'Let us take a taxi,' he said, 'I do not want you to get tired.'

'If only we could take a dolmus,' said Suzette. She explained. 'I was talking to a Turkish girl yesterday. She told me about Turkish taxis. A dolmus is a car which takes several people as passengers. The cars are drawn up in certain places, almost like the conventional taxi rank. The difference is that you enter one of them and say, "I want to go to such-and-such a place." You seat yourself and then the driver shouts "Any more for —" wherever it happens to be. The car soon fills up. You pay a fixed fare as on a bus, with no tip.'

Captain Mirov halted as they talked. He was so engrossed with her and she with him that the other two called the taxi.

They sat silently, withdrawn from all but one another. Around them surged the other road users—pedestrians, pony carts, human porters carrying gigantic loads on their backs, laden donkeys.

At last they reached the Great Bazaar. Suzette insisted on paying her own fare. She did not know the Russian scale of allowances, but nearly all service men seemed to be hard up. The war was apt to make a woman far more independent, anyway.

The Bazaar was huge, and teeming with humanity. It was a veritable rabbit warren. It was walled in and roofed, and its

heart was a main arcade. In this were displayed goods which one could find in Europe. The Russians were obviously impressed, and stopped to look at many of the everyday household items. They wandered off, too, into the side alleys, which were heaped with masses of objets d'art and antiques, many of them genuine.

As is the custom in the East, each alley-way specialized in one particular trade. There was one exciting section which sold ancient pottery, and another little street for jewellery. One could stand and watch the craftsmen creating ear-rings, bracelets and necklaces. The designs were traditional, as Suzette noticed when they found one of the merchants with some antique pieces in his stock. Suzette picked up a gold filigree collar—it was a beautiful piece.

'It would suit you,' said Serge.

'I wonder how much it is,' asked Suzette.

'Shall I ask him? Although, if you really want to buy it, you are expected to bargain for it.'

The owner of the stall was a Persian; the market was as international in flavour as the rest of Teheran, and Jews, Armenians, Greeks and others eagerly tried to attract the attention of prospective customers. They wheedled, cajoled and beckoned. They held up for examination fine Persian fabrics, antiques or embroideries.

Serge asked the Persian how much he wanted for his necklace, and he mentioned a figure. Serge laughed derisively, and taking Suzette's arm, moved off. Their companions were at another stall, looking at some earrings made of silver. Hastily, the Persian called after their retreating figures. Serge halted, turned back, and made another offer. There was much lively bargaining and bantering between stall-holder and purchaser, and finally Serge returned to Suzette.

'He wanted 5,000 Rial, and we are now down to 2,200. What do you think?'

'I think it is a good idea to buy it,' said Suzette. 'You see, I have started buying myself a piece of jewellery in each new country I visit—it is a permanent reminder of happy days in

that particular place. It is easy to carry around, and it is not money thrown away, as is so often the case when one buys souvenirs.'

'You must have been in many countries,' said Serge. 'It must be wonderful to travel.'

'Have you travelled much?' asked Suzette, and then was sorry she had spoken. A look of pain had momentarily crossed Serge's face.

'For a Russian, I have travelled very extensively.'

Did she detect a note of irony, an emphasis on the word 'Russian'? But no, his expression was calm, normal. The other two had now joined them. Suzette said, 'I would like to buy the necklace, but I haven't that amount of money on me.'

Serge spoke to the vendor. 'He says his brother-in-law will deliver it to your hotel, if you are staying in Teheran. Suzette told Serge where she lived and Serge gave instructions to the Persian.

'Yes, he will deliver it,' Serge said. 'Will you be in tomorrow morning at about 9.30?'

'Make it eleven,' said Suzette. 'I have to go to the bank at 9.30.'

She gave directions as to where she lived, and they concluded the deal.

'What time do you have lunch?' asked Serge. 'I know where you live now, so I hope that you will allow me to call for you tomorrow and take you out. It has been a wonderfully pleasant afternoon.'

Suzette agreed enthusiastically. It *had* been a wonderful afternoon, though they had done nothing out of the ordinary. To Serge she said, quite naturally, realizing that he would want her to be straightforward, 'Call for me, if you like, at 12.30.'

'Would you mind if I brought Ilystin and Latsky? You see,' he added hastily, 'they are also strangers here, and . . .' He hesitated, as though reluctant to go on.

Suzette looked at him enquiringly, waiting for him to go on. 'We are not encouraged to wander off by ourselves,' he said.

She quite understood: naturally, such behaviour would be

frowned upon. She had begun to understand the character of the Russians, even in her short stay. She had already met several Persian people. Inevitably, owing to their geographical position, the Persians were engrossed in politics, and to talk politics always involved the Russians. Centuries of living next door to one another had given the Persians a fine understanding of their powerful neighbour.

The Russians, it seemed, had always suffered from a sort of pathological suspicion of other nations. All through the centuries there had been distrust from Russian to Russian, from Russia to other nations. It was an inborn fault, and once realized, explained much that seemed arbitrary in Russian behaviour and diplomacy. So that was it. Serge was afraid of what his friends might say if he went on a perfectly innocent date with a young French girl. He was even suspicious that his friends might betray him to the powerful authorities, who, in turn, might suspect his motives. It would not be the attraction of two young people for one another, but the sinister conflict of ideology. It would be the seduction of mind, not of body, that they would fear.

Suzette returned to the hostel, and gazed out of her room at the little almond tree which grew in the courtyard. She was acutely conscious of her loneliness. The desire to love someone—to be loved—was a recurring pain. She had no single person of her own. No one who waited for her letters in some far off land. She was the last one to feel self pity. She hardly knew that she wept until the warm tear fell on her bare arm. She dabbed her eyes.

Suzette turned back from the last sunlight on the terrace to look into her little room, which by comparison with the late afternoon sunlight looked shadowy and softly cool. She thought of Serge: he seemed to her the most exciting man she had met in her life. With a twinge of conscience, she thought of Etien, but she could not even picture his face—the image of Serge blotted out her memory of him.

Unwillingly, her thoughts came back to reality. She crossed the sparsely-furnished room, pulled back the curtains from the

small, roughly-made wardrobe, and took out a dress—the one she would wear that night. It was blue-green. She held it up to herself, looking in the small mirror on the wall. No, that was not right. She put it back and drew out a vivid scarlet chiffon gown. Its vibrant colour made an exotic contrast with her thick black hair—she looked like a highly-born Chinese.

Her mood changed. She felt alive and aglow, as she had never felt before.

She had a tremendous feeling of expectancy and excitement. Life had a different meaning for her now, and yet it was the same bare room and the same routine of living.

She thought of Serge's hands, with the slim, square-tipped fingers. Their hands had accidentally touched during the purchase of the necklace, and she imagined them now caressing her body. She closed her eyes in a shudder of ecstasy, and passed the evening almost in a trance.

After her performance that night, she went to her room to lie in bed, restlessly awaiting the morning. She was up early to go to the bank, and then went home to await the delivery of the necklace. The man was late, which did not greatly surprise her. Unpunctuality was an Eastern habit which died hard.

At twenty-five past twelve a message was sent to her room that a gentleman had a package for her, and she raced down to the hall. At first she thought it might be Serge, but no, of course, he was coming with his friends.

A swarthy man, with enormous eyes with black smudges underneath them, said in French, 'I have brought you your necklace, Miss Bois.'

Suzette had the money in her handbag. She unwrapped the parcel, and took out the collar. It was indeed beautiful. It was even more exquisitely designed than she had remembered. There had been a sense of unreality about yesterday, and now she could remember things only dimly, except for Serge. It was as though she saw him in sharp focus against a blurred background of the day's events.

She remembered the way his hair grew on his forehead; his slightly one-sided smile.

'I am sorry to be late,' said the Persian. 'I could not find anyone to look after my business until my son came home.'

He was interrupted by the arrival of the housemaid.

'There are three gentlemen at the door for you,' she said.

'Show them in,' said Suzette, her heart pounding.

They came in, Serge leading the way. In her left hand, the necklace dripped, liquid gold, from her fingers. She gave him her right hand, and looked up at him.

'You are as beautiful as I remembered,' he whispered, so that none of the others could hear. She said something in welcome to them all, but a moment later she could not even remember what she had said. It was impossible for her to behave naturally with Serge. She felt stifled with desire, and her heart pounded with such violence that she almost feared that the others might hear it.

She was wearing a simple white dress. Serge took the necklace from her fingers, undid the clasp and put it round her neck. This simple act was almost ritualistic. It was as though he was making some symbolic claim on her. It seemed to the others that Serge and Suzette were oblivious to everything except one another.

The Persian's melancholy eyes glowed now with sympathy. 'I must be going,' he said. Suzette accompanied him to the door and gave him his money. Then the four young people went out to lunch.

Serge took them to a Russian restaurant. Suzette had eaten Russian food before with Etien. They had a fine bortsch and coteletki y gribi—cutlets stewed in a delicious mushroom sauce. Both dishes had the distinctive flavour which smetana, or sour cream, gives to all Russian dishes. They drank kvass with their meal, and afterwards had glasses of steaming lemon tea. The others had two or three glasses of vodka too, but Suzette noticed that Serge had one glass, which he only half-finished.

After the meal, Serge produced a long, slim cigarette case, filled with the traditional cardboard-tipped Russian cigarettes. He offered one to Suzette. As she accepted it, he took the cigar-

ette from her and said, 'Allow me.' He folded the cardboard tip of the cigarette, and then pinched it, first flat, and then again at the top to make a nicotine trap. He handed it back to her. Ilytsin said something to him in Russian, and there was a lively discussion. Suzette asked what it was all about.

'Ilytsin says that it is very bad manners to fold down the ends of a cigarette, and I have just told him that you can go to any railway station and see used cardboard tips by the thousand thrown away on the ground—and folded.'

Ilytsin, who had been listening to the conversation closely, his small oblique eyes almost buried under heavy brows, now spoke to Suzette in heavily accented French. 'It is not so, what he is saying,' he said. 'You will not find cigarette mouthpieces folded so.'

Suzette had an unpleasant feeling of surprise. Surely she had understood that neither Ilytsin nor Latski spoke French. It was almost as though she had been taking a bath and suddenly looked up to see a strange man standing watching her—she almost felt he had been eavesdropping. She retaliated with, 'I thought you did not speak French.'

'But I do not speak French,' answered Ilytsin, running his pudgy hand over his almost shaven head. Was it shaven, or was his hair really only half-an-inch all over?

Latsky broke in. 'You see, only our friend Serge speaks it properly.'

Suzette felt betrayed. Why hadn't Serge told her that the other two understood her language? After that, the party warmed up for Suzette now included the other two in the conversation, whereas before it had been split into two—the Russian and the French.

She was astonished to find that all three were remarkably conversant with opera. Not only Russian opera, but Italian, German and French. She knew that service men from other countries hardly would have known who composed the operas.

'How is it,' she asked, 'that you all know so much about music? Is that why you are all such close friends, because you have similar interests?'

Lasky, the blond giant, threw back his head and laughed, a deep reverberating sound, which came from the depths of his body.

'There is nothing unique in our knowledge of music,' he said, when he had stopped laughing. 'If you were to speak to a road worker, or an unskilled labourer in our country, they might know much more than we do. Great works of art, whether music or painting or ballet, belong to the people. There are no starving people, either mentally or physically. No exploited workers toiling in verminous factories.'

'I never did think that,' said Suzette, 'but even the pampered workmen of the West would hardly have a knowledge of opera.'

Latsky's brows knitted together; his good humour had vanished, and he spoke again in Russian. He jumped up, and strode to the door. Serge spoke to him, obviously trying to calm him. He shrugged, and as quickly, his mood changed. He came and sat down again.

Suzette would have liked to ask what had so upset Latsky, but she did not want to provoke another outburst. Perhaps he had had too much vodka.

In the afternoon, they went sight-seeing to a place which could have been a setting for the 'Arabian Nights'. They wandered through the streets, always upwards, for again it was hilly.

At the top of one of the hills they found a Persian cemetery. Under the shade of the trees were the obelisks of the departed. Men and women were buried together. In death there was no segregation of the sexes as in life: a carved turban on top of some of the obelisks denoted the grave of a man, a carved scarf that of a woman.

Ilytsin and Latsky sat on a low parapet, deep in conversation. Serge took Suzette by the arm and led her off to see another part of the cemetery. The other two, engrossed in their conversation, did not even notice the couple slip away.

There was a large tree which hid them from the view of the other two. He drew her behind it, and without a word, clasped

her in his arms. He kissed her again and again, and she responded until both were utterly weak and spent with their passion. Serge said suddenly, 'I want you. I must have you, and will come to visit you tonight.'

Suzette felt incapable of refusing him. 'Why not?' she thought to herself. The war with its terrible feeling of uncertainty made one want to grab happiness when death might be waiting just a few hours away.

'How will you avoid Ilytsin and Latsky?' said Suzette. She suddenly started to laugh. 'How are such things managed in Russia?' she said. 'Do you always have to go around in four-somes?'

Serge laughed too. 'In Russia it is different,' he said. 'You see, here there are always enemies of the Soviet Union. For our own protection we like to be together. I do not even know whether Ilytsin and Latsky are to be trusted.'

'Trusted?' echoed Suzette. 'Trusted in what? What danger could there be?'

Serge looked down at her. 'Capitalist propaganda,' he said bitterly. 'You see, even our allies are not to be trusted. They cannot help themselves. They have been poisoned with wrong thinking since birth.'

Suzette would have wished that he was joking, but it was obvious that he was not. He was completely sincere.

Chapter Seven

SO this was the real thing. Suzette and Serge spent every night together. He left early, before the dawn, for the military police were ever watchful.

Suzette was radiantly happy, and it was almost as though the ugliness of war had been banished. But not for long.

One evening, waiting for Serge, Suzette sat brushing her long, dark hair. She was dressed only in a white *négligée*, which hardly concealed her exquisite body. She was impatient for his arrival, and several times looked at the small travelling clock on the little bedside table. She even held it to her ear once to see if it had stopped.

He came at last, half-an-hour later than their usual time of meeting. He was usually very punctual. Punctuality was a virtue of the Russians—or rather an acquisition, for in pre-Revolution days, lateness was the rule rather than the exception.

She heard his special tap upon the door. It was a code of theirs—two short, two long, two short raps. She leapt from her seat to the door and opened it. His arms went around her, and he held her closely. Their mouths met in wild, impatient searching. She drew him into the room, and closed the door.

Instantly she knew there was something wrong. 'What is it?' she said.

'We have to leave tomorrow,' he answered. 'I should not really tell you, it is strictly against orders.'

Suzette put her hands in front of her mouth, to stifle the cry which came involuntarily. Her thick-lashed eyes stared at him in silent misery.

'We have to bring some more equipment through Persia back to Russia,' he said. Then, after a pause, 'I don't know what I shall do without you. I have never felt like this about any woman. Oh yes, I have thought I was in love, but you are as much part of me as the blood in my veins.'

Their love-making that night was as abandoned as though the morning would bring the end of the world. Suzette got up to let Serge out of the house, and she neither knew nor cared whether the other tenants heard her. She wanted to spend every precious moment with him.

'Shall I ever see you again?' she whispered.

'I will see you somehow. I will come back again, whatever happens.'

After he had gone, she cried until she was numb with grief and could cry no longer. She felt dull, aching, bruised. If she could have chosen then to die, she would have done so.

The days passed. Mechanically she gave her performances, and sometimes the troupe visited other camps. She would sleep in some of the camps in a sort of dormitory with the other women. They seemed to her to talk and chatter endlessly.

Would she ever see Serge again? She had not even a photograph of him, but he was deeply etched on her memory. Why had she fallen in love with him? It would have been so easy to love someone whose life was less complicated. There had been so many men who could offer her security and happiness. But no, her wilful heart had not listened to reason, and she could foresee only sorrow in loving such a man. She had seen the disapproval of his two companions. They had liked her well enough, but they had mistrusted her too, and feared for their friend.

At last the troupe returned to Teheran. Suzette went back to the hostel, and felt a pang of unhappiness as she opened the

door to her room. It had become something dear to her, for it reminded her of Serge.

She stiffened suddenly, and walked across the room to the bedside table, which had a small drawer in it. She herself had the key, but she could see at once that the drawer had been tampered with. It was open, and although the contents were in order, someone had obviously searched through them. Nothing was missing, so robbery had not been the motive.

She now remembered that, coming upstairs, she had heard what she thought was a door bang above her. Someone must have been disturbed while searching her room, and had not had time to re-lock the drawer.

But who would want to search through her small possessions? There could be only one answer. Either Ilytsin or Latsky. She could not bring herself to believe that Serge would have done this to her.

She slept for two hours, then bathed and changed. She unpacked just her make-up. She had taken a minimum of clothes on the journey, and all would have to be sent to the cleaners. From behind the curtain where her clothes were kept, she took out the flame-coloured dress. She was not in the mood for it, but it was the first thing which came to hand.

The roads on which she had travelled that day had been bumpy, but after her bath she felt fresh again, but despondent. She was uneasy at the sinister incident of her room being searched. She missed Serge in the most devastating way, and the return to the little room renewed her longing for him, which had not been so painful when she had been on the move.

She made herself up for her performance that night. The commandant had been slightly apologetic about her performing so soon after her journey. 'Some of the Allied troops have just come in, and I have invited them to a concert. You are our star, would you mind singing tonight?'

When she arrived at the camp for the concert she was pleasantly surprised to see a huge audience. She always enjoyed a big audience, for it was a challenge to persuade each individual to give his close attention.

The concert was in the open air, but Suzette was relieved to see that microphones had been installed on the stage. Singing out of doors had its problems, and well-placed microphones and amplifiers were a great help in avoiding voice strain.

She watched the other acts. She felt miserably depressed, and was dreading her performance now. She started to move in the direction of the stage, for after this act, she would be on. The comedian and his partner went through their routine. Idly, she looked at the engrossed faces of the audience. Then, as she walked softly towards the steps, someone touched her arm. She looked round, and saw it was Ilytsin. He put his finger to his lips, and whispered in his heavily accented French, 'Serge is here, and he will see you after the performance.'

It was as though someone had removed iron weights from her arms and legs. Her mind was released from its dragging sense of defeat. She came forward into the spotlight, and she glowed and shimmered from within. Her voice had a depth and intensity which she had lost for days. She tried to distinguish, amongst the blurred bubbles of human faces, his face. There he was, near the front. He was with Latsky, and Ilytsin was sitting several rows behind him.

Her songs ended amidst a storm of applause. The audience could not bear to let her go. Many stood up and shouted in their own language for her to return—to sing them just one more song. She was happy that she was in such good form, for it was the first time that Serge had either seen or heard her performance. He was standing and clapping, Latsky at his side. She sang one more song at the request of the commandant. Again there was a storm of applause, but she hurried off down the stairs before they could detain her again.

Several of the audience crowded around her, but Serge pushed his way through them and took her arm.

'My beloved, my darling. I had no idea that you were a star, that you have such talent.'

He looked at her with an expression of awe, as he held her at arm's length.

'You mean you loved me just for myself?' said Suzette teas-

ingly. They laughed happily, oblivious of the people around them.

She looked past Serge. She could see Latsky pushing towards them. He towered above the others, his good-looking face expressionless. Ilytsin was behind him, his face radiating admiration. Into her mind leapt the words, 'Beauty and the Beast'.

Something was nagging at her—a thought, which at first seemed preposterous. Ilytsin's looks were against him, and trying to think of who had searched her rooms, she had first suspected him. His beetle-brows and almost shaven head, and the small, pudgy hands, gave him a brutish look. Latsky, on the other hand, had a face which instantly drew admiring glances. It was strange, handsome as he was, he had not the same attraction for her as Serge. As Latsky drew towards them, Serge released her hands and said formally, 'Your performance was excellent. I am so happy we were able to attend the concert.'

Latsky spoke to Serge in Russian.

'Goodbye,' said Serge to Suzette abruptly. 'Perhaps we shall meet again some time.'

Before she could feel the impact of these unexpectedly brutal words, she saw Ilytsin. Behind Latsky's back he was waving a reassuring hand, as much as to say, 'Take no notice.' And then the three had gone, leaving her in the crowd.

She pushed her way through the crowd, had a quick meal, and went straight back home. Half-an-hour later she heard the special knock. She flung open the door, and Serge was there. They melted into one another's arms, and it was hours later before their thoughts and words became coherent.

She looked tenderly at Serge lying on the bed beside her. He had his arms folded, and she brushed his wide shoulders with her lips.

'It was terrible without you,' she said.

'I cannot be without you either,' said Serge. 'And yet . . .' He looked at her. 'Suzette, we have known one another for such a short time. Can you really be sure that you love me enough?'

'Enough for what?'

'Enough to marry me.' Suzette held her breath, then breathed again rapidly.

'I am sure I love you, Serge. Why shouldn't we get married?'

'Because, my dear, we shall meet with hostility.'

'From your parents?' she asked.

Serge smiled ruefully. 'No,' he said. 'We shall find hostility all round. From my army superiors for one thing. You see, you have lived in a society very different from mine. I do not know whether you would be able to fit in.'

Suzette drew back a little.

'No. don't be offended,' he said. 'Your voice alone would give you an entrée into our society. But from the little I have seen of life outside Russia, there are various differences which you might not be ready to overlook.'

Suzette stopped him from saying any more by kissing him. 'It is unthinkable to be without you,' she said.

Suzette and Serge made plans to marry, there and then. 'We will have a civil wedding, and it must be straight away,' said Suzette, fearful of another parting.

'We shall need witnesses,' said Serge. 'They had better be Russian. I think we ought to keep our marriage secret, my dear.'

'But why?' asked Suzette. 'Surely we are allies?'

Serge shook his head, 'We are allies today, but who knows what we shall be tomorrow? I am needed for the army, in exactly the job I am doing. I am serving my country in the most efficient way I know.

'Ilytsin will be one of the witnesses,' he went on.

'And Latsky?'

Serge turned his eyes towards her. 'No, not Latsky. It is going to be difficult about him. Strictly speaking, he is my C.O.'

'But isn't he a lieutenant?' said Suzette incredulously. Serge hesitated. It was obvious that he was torn between the desire to say more, and a whole lifetime of training.

Suzette's suspicions about Latsky rose again. She told Serge about the searching of her room. He was angry. 'How dare

he!' he said. 'And yet, it is his duty, and I would do the same in his place.'

'Whatever are you talking about?' asked Suzette, bewildered. He made up his mind.

'Latsky looks after the security of our company,' he told her. 'He is a lieutenant in the company, but he is a colonel in Intelligence. He is guarding against the kind of situation which we are both facing. He has to be sure of you.'

'And Ilytsin.'

Serge smiled warmly. 'Ilytsin is just another Russian like myself.'

It was extraordinarily difficult to plan the marriage. Both bride and groom were often being posted to another area, and for security reasons they were never told where or when until the very last moment. They confided their troubles to another member of Ensa, a singer who had rather taken Suzette under his wing. He was a nice old man, whose repertoire consisted almost entirely of songs which were at least ten years old. He had been a professional all his life, but he had none of Suzette's spectacular quality.

One day, during rehearsals, the old man asked her why she was so absent minded, and on impulse she confided in him, swearing him to secrecy. He tried to talk her out of her determination to marry Serge.

'Unless you can persuade him to live in Western Europe or in America, you should give him up.'

But Suzette's mind was made up.

'I would ask one of the Embassies, said the old man at last. 'They will be able to help you. Why not ask the British? They would be very discreet about it.'

So it was that Suzette and Serge were married in the British Embassy. Their witnesses were the old baritone, and a Persian employee of the British Embassy. Ilytsin was in the plot too. He was not to be a witness after all, but was to keep Latsky out of the way. They had gone off to a drinking party. It was extremely hard to make Latsky drunk, but Ilytsin finally managed it by replacing his water with vodka when he was

out of the room. Latsky became noisy, then morose, and finally sentimental. He started to sing Russian songs in a deep bass, tears rolling down his cheeks. It seemed he had forgotten that Serge was not being watched. Serge had told him that he felt ill, and was staying in the barracks.

Now Ilytsin himself felt his head spinning.

Latsky said, 'We must take Serge some vodka. Our dear comrade. He must also enjoy the evening.' He hiccuped loudly, and felt in his pockets for money.

'No, leave him,' said Ilytsin. Latsky looked solemnly at his friend.

'Do you think he was really ill?' he asked, suddenly suspicious, but too drunk now for effective action. 'Perhaps he is out with the French girl again.'

'And if he is? What is wrong with that?' replied Ilytsin. But before Latsky could pursue this line of thought, he slumped over in his chair. Ilytsin quietly called for a taxi, and they returned to camp.

Suzette and Serge were married, in spite of the difficulties. They had eluded not only Latsky's watchful eyes, but symbolically, those of Stalin. It seemed incredible that Stalin could have built such a legend around himself. To the Russians it was almost as if he had knowledge of each and every one of them; as though he had some supernatural power to watch their smallest actions. If he had been aware of this, Stalin would have encouraged it, for it gave great power to the whole structure of Soviet society.

Suzette and Serge lived in a state of ecstasy, heightened by suspense. The constant fear that the secret marriage would be discovered increased their passion rather than dimmed it. The one thing they dreaded was that either should be posted to another country and, finally, this worry plus another incident forced them to a decision.

One evening, Suzette and Serge were with Ilytsin and Latsky, who now seemed resigned to Serge's love affair. Before the marriage, Latsky had already carefully and secretly examined Suzette's background. To his experienced eye it seemed

that she was what she claimed to be. Now, when he thought of the two of them together, he shrugged his shoulders. That they should have an affair seemed a completely normal situation to him.

They were dining, all four together, in their favourite Russian restaurant. Serge passed a cigarette to Suzette, having folded and lighted it for her. She smoked very little, but enjoyed a cigarette after a meal. She inhaled, and suddenly her face contorted. She turned pale, and involuntarily she pressed the cigarette into the ashtray. Waves of nausea filled her, and she felt so sick she dared not trust herself to speak.

'What is it, darling?' asked Serge, instantly worried. Ilytsin said kindly, 'Shall I get a glass of water for you?'

Latsky was silent. He watched Suzette, his eyes narrowed. She recovered herself, and sipped the water which Ilytsin had fetched for her. In a moment she felt better.

'How silly of me,' she said.

'Shall I telephone your commandant and say that you cannot sing tonight?'

Suzette shook her head. 'No, Serge. It is nothing. I shall be quite all right in an hour or so.'

Two days later, the same thing happened to her again, but this time she and Serge were alone in her room. The waves of nausea were prolonged this time. She felt so sick that she could neither move nor speak. Her forehead was damp with a cold sweat, and she felt alternately icy and feverish.

'Suzette, you must see a doctor!' cried Serge, at her side. He gripped her wrists, trying to give her comfort by his strength.

She started to cry, for no reason, but as though her heart would break. Serge was appalled. His beautiful, placid Suzette was a changed and irrational being. What was wrong?

'I am going to have a child,' said Suzette woefully. 'What are we going to do?'

'Are you sure?' he asked.

'There is no doubt. I have suspected it for the last two months. This morning I fainted during rehearsal. I was sent right away to the army doctor, and he confirmed it. He looked

at me strangely, but after all, it is not the first time that a Service girl has been pregnant. I did not know then whether I should have told him I was married.'

Serge frowned, his brows knitted together, as he thought over the problem. 'Darling, we must speak to Latsky and Ilytsin. We cannot hide our marriage any longer. In any case, we shall have to declare it because you will be coming back to Russia with me after this dreadful war is over.'

Suzette shivered. With terrible clarity she saw the nature of the problem facing them. Could their love stand the strain of the discomforts they might have to face? She realized now how much she had enjoyed the material well-being of the years since her meeting with Etien. But the thought suddenly seemed disloyal, and she put it out of her mind. As though reading her thoughts, Serge raised her head and looked into her eyes. 'Suzette, don't be afraid. You will have to learn about our world. You will be happy in it, I am sure. There can be no greater happiness than to live in our society, and you will be an honoured member of it with your beautiful voice. Creative people are treated with a respect far higher than in the capitalist world. Our teachers and professors are looked up to instead of living in a state of near poverty.'

He paused, then said suddenly with hatred, 'One day we shall rule the world, and save the workers from the slavery of the values imposed by capitalism. We shall free them all.'

'But Serge!' Suzette looked at him in wonder. 'The people are not the slaves that you seem to think them. They have a chance of rising from poverty if they wish. Look at me. I have been lucky, but even so, I might have escaped my environment in a thousand other ways.'

'You must attend classes,' said Serge. 'You must be taught the elements of our society. You yourself described your unhappy childhood. That could not have happened in Russia. You would not have waited until you were discovered quite by chance. You would have been picked out and sent to a special Conservatoire of Music. There are twenty-two musical higher educational institutions, nineteen music schools attached to

the Conservatoires; over a hundred senior music schools. They provide a ten-year education specializing in music. Why, there are nearly a thousand elementary music schools which give a seven-year course.'

Suzette was appalled. She needed comfort desperately. She felt sick, and here was Serge talking like a guide book. She knew of no Frenchman who could have given anything like accurate figures on such a subject as education. She turned her head away again, and felt herself heaving. She got up from the bed, groped her way out of the room and just managed to get to the bathroom. She wasn't sick, as she thought she was going to be, and the plain, no-nonsense washbasin seemed to restore her to calm.

When she came back into the room, Serge embraced her. 'My poor darling,' he said. 'How tactless of me to worry you with facts and figures at such a time.'

'How did you know all that? Is it common for Russians to quote statistics?' asked Suzette irritably.

Serge smiled, and looked embarrassed—almost boyish, and then he laughed.

'I knew you were interested in music,' he said, 'and I wanted to find out all about our musical activities so that you would know what to expect when we arrive back home. You see, the West knows only a little about our life and how cultured it is.'

Suzette kissed him. She was reassured. So he had found out only for her sake! Perhaps life would not be too dreary in Russia after all.

Suzette continued with Ensa another month, and then retired from her unit. She had confided in the M.O. that she was married, and that she would want to come back to her unit after the birth of the child.

'Perhaps I could work part-time,' she suggested. 'If you retire me officially now, I could either join up again, or work as a civilian. That would perhaps be better, because it would enable me to see my husband.'

Suzette felt terribly unattractive during the months of her

pregnancy. Her hair seemed to be lank, and her face drawn, with heavy black shadows under her eyes. When she forgot that her waistline was thickening, she was sharply reminded of it when she tried to struggle into some favourite dress.

She was happy in the knowledge that she could buy clothes without asking Serge for extra money. The interest from Etien's well-invested shares came regularly to her, and often she gave a silent word of thanks to her benefactor.

She sometimes thought of what the situation might have been had she been carrying Etien's child instead of Serge's. How proud Etien would have been. She hastily suppressed the thought—it seemed almost unfaithful.

Serge, although at first disconcerted at the news, was now quite proud. It seemed to add to his stature, and to bring Suzette closer to him.

Latsky had taken the news of their secret marriage far better than they had anticipated. He had called on Suzette and interrogated her—that was the only word for it. When she gave replies, he nodded his head, as though what she said was not news. It was oddly irritating. She had a strong conviction that Latsky was merely questioning her to try and catch her out. She was tempted to give him some incorrect information about herself, but she decided against it, for it was easy to see that Latsky was not a man to be trifled with. He would not have tolerated being made to look a fool.

Serge was tremendously attentive to her, and she sighed happily to herself—it seemed that young Communist fathers behaved just like their capitalist equals. As the time drew nearer, he would not allow her to carry the smallest package, or even a tea tray. He often insisted on carrying her handbag. She found this very endearing.

Ilytsin was also unexpectedly kind. Suzette thought to herself how misleading someone's personal appearance could be. Ilytsin was a fat, rather gross individual. His coarse features disguised a highly-developed sensitivity to other people's feelings.

Suzette slipped on a coat as Serge and Ilytsin waited for her

to go out for dinner. She looked at herself in the mirror in her room. She was eight months pregnant and she looked it. But so gradual had been the change in her own body, that she deluded herself that no one knew of her condition. The coat did not look right. It was meant to wrap over, but now it barely met edge to edge. Suddenly she saw herself as she was, gross and swollen. She dragged off the coat, and sat down.

'I cannot go out,' she said petulantly.

'Why?' asked the two men.

'I am such a sight,' she said, 'How can you be seen with me?'

Serge's mouth dropped open in astonishment. 'You look no different from yesterday,' he said.

Suzette started to cry. She suddenly realized that she was sick to death with the whole business of pregnancy—of the unborn baby kicking inside her, and of the general heaviness. It seemed as though the nine months were going on for ever and ever, and that she would never be slim and beautiful again. She was crying for her lost beauty, as much as anything else.

Ilytsin said, 'My dear, dear child. Yes, you look pregnant. But you look the most beautiful pregnant woman in the whole of Teheran. And after all, you have stiff competition, for nearly every other woman is pregnant. 'Why,' he added, quoting an old Russian saying, 'you look like an Empress carrying the heir to the throne.'

Suzette was so grateful that she leaned forward and squeezed the pudgy hands. Serge dried her eyes, and kissed her. 'Come, my pigeon. Wear your Persian stole, and we will perhaps go to the cinema after dinner.'

They had been sitting for only half an hour at their favourite table, when Latsky joined them. It seemed almost as though he could not bear to let them out of his sight for more than an hour or so.

'How are you getting on with your lessons?' he asked.

'Oh, fine,' said Suzette drily, as though he didn't know.

Why did he pretend that he was not aware of everything she did? He knows how many times I brush my teeth, and how many times I go to the bathroom, so why the mockery of

asking how the lessons were getting on? Suzette thought of the dreary lessons, and it nearly put her off her food.

It was surprising that such lessons were available in Teheran. The classroom was in a house which had formerly belonged to a Turk. It was purely oriental in appearance. A sightseer could have passed the building a thousand times without guessing what went on behind its walls. It was ideally suited for its purpose, for its windows concealed the occupants, and yet allowed those inside to look out on to the street, as is the custom in countries where they keep their women-folk hidden.

Suzette remembered her first lesson only too well. She walked up the stairs and through a door in a small passageway. When she knocked on the door, the voices inside hushed instantly. Suzette was ushered in by a small, dark woman with narrow eyes. Her black hair, parted in the middle, was drawn back severely from her face. She was dressed in a mannish-looking shirt and skirt, which seemed to be the only outfit she possessed. In profile, the seat of the skirt was baggy and shiny at the back. It spoke mutely, but eloquently, of the number of hours that Nina Andreyovna had spent sitting on a hard bench imparting the Russian language to her pupils.

The room itself had a ledge built round its walls in Turkish fashion. During the day, these benches served as seats. At night they were converted into sleeping places. Later, Suzette suspected that Nina Andreyovna lived in this room, but there were no signs of either possessions or clothes, other than the carpets which were on the floor and on the seats.

Nina herself sat on a hard wooden bench facing her pupils. Suzette now looked at the students. There was one pale, Czech girl, with a long, thin nose. Suzette discovered afterwards that she had married a Russian, and that she spoke no Czech, only German. Czech was a Slav language, and akin to Russian and Polish. Afterwards, this girl explained to Suzette that it would not have helped her to speak Czech, as the similarity of the languages merely muddled one.

There was also an Englishman with a north-country accent. He wore glasses, and had wavy dark hair. Behind the glasses,

bright mischevious eyes gleamed. He had a lively mind, and Suzette wondered why he was learning Russian. When she talked to him later, she found out that he was a British Communist. He was not wasting his time while in army service, but had soon found Communist friends in Persia.

There were five or six other nebulous characters, but Suzette only remembered the Czech girl and the Englishman. Nina was an excellent teacher, although a hard taskmaster. It was easy to see that she would not tolerate any foolishness.

Their first task was to learn the alphabet. To Suzette's great relief, she found that it was phonetic, and once learned, it was surprising how quickly one could read. Soon she acquired the rudiments of the language and had a fairly large vocabulary.

It was when she started to read the text books that she felt disgusted. She read: 'The workers in Britain have been known to drop dead from hunger in the bread queues as the rich pass by in their cars, spattering them with mud.'

This sentence had been written on the blackboard by one of the students, who had made a grammatical mistake. Nina turned to Suzette. 'There is a mistake on the blackboard,' she said. 'Will you please correct it?'

Suzette, often irritable during her pregnancy, looked at the blackboard in stony silence. Nina persisted, 'Where is the mistake?'

'There are several mistakes,' said Suzette. 'Not only in grammar, but in sentiment. I know England,' she said, turning to the rest of the class and addressing them fearlessly. 'This sentence is a lie, and quite absurd.'

Nina was too surprised to comment. She turned her back on Suzette, and herself rubbed out the mistake and wrote it in again, correctly. She passed on to the next student. Her training as a teacher had not included dealing with open mutiny.

Chapter Eight

SUZETTE groaned. It was not yet light, and dawn was breaking. She felt for Serge at her side, and shook the recumbent form.

‘Serge—darling—I have had the first pain.’

Instantly he was awake, solicitous, sympathetic. Hastily he dressed himself, then helped her into her clothes. He was touchingly concerned. Suzette was now in agony, but she tried to joke and pretend that all was well.

Together they went downstairs, and Serge hailed a taxi and tenderly helped her into it.

It was the day after the birth of the baby. Suzette thought how lucky it was that Serge had not been working when her labour began. She was in a hospital ward with several other women. The hospitals were crowded at that time, and also she felt that Latsky would disapprove if she had a room of her own. It was extraordinary how he dominated her way of life already.

The child was a boy. When Suzette looked down on the small downy head on her arm, she could hardly believe that he was really hers. His hands especially fascinated her. They were tiny, perfectly formed and yet tremendously strong. Their clinging power was phenomenal.

Serge visited her often. He brought books and magazines, both French and Russian. One was constantly aware of the dreary propaganda in the Russian periodicals, but the French were light-hearted, even in those difficult times.

Suzette was allowed to go home after a brief stay in the hospital. She decided to take a small room for the baby next to her own, which was conveniently vacant. She also engaged a Greek girl to look after the child.

She told Serge of this arrangement after it had been completed. He had been sent on duty the day before she came out of the hospital. It was typical that he never knew from one day to the next where he would be.

On the evening of his return, she was in the small room with the baby. The door was open, and she heard a light step behind her. She whirled round, and there he was. His arms went round her, and they kissed. At last Suzette drew away, and regarded him solemnly.

'We have missed you so much,' she said, 'your son and I.'

'Why have you moved to a smaller room?' asked Serge.

'I haven't moved. I still have our room,' she said, 'but this is the baby's nursery. I have also engaged a Nannie. I want to start work again as soon as possible.'

'But that is ridiculous,' said Serge.

Suzette thought at first that he was going to dissuade her from working, but not at all. He went on:

'There was no need to get another room. Your room is enormous for one person. We could have made a partition, with curtains--or even with blankets. The nurse and baby could have been behind that.'

'Why on earth should they?' asked Suzette. 'I am not depriving anyone else of a room. Two rooms is, after all, a very small home.'

'One room is a very large home for two people,' he said. His voice was stern. 'In Russia we should consider ourselves fortunate in a room of that size not to have at least another couple with us.'

'But, Serge, surely only the very poor have to suffer such dis-

comforts,' said Suzette in horror. Even in the extreme poverty of her youth, her family had lived in two rooms.

Serge's voice rose. It was as though he were blaming her for some terrible extravagance.

'How are you going to fit into our life there?' he asked. 'You are behaving as though I am a top Party Member, instead of an engineer.'

Suzette longed to change the subject. It was unusual for them to quarrel, and she wondered whether it might be caused by his subconscious jealousy towards the baby. She tried to embrace him, but his body was still stiff with hostility. She looked up at him.

'Serge, darling, don't let us quarrel. We see one another so rarely, and these precious hours together should be filled with happiness, not with disagreements.'

Slowly he relaxed.

'Where shall we live in Russia?' she asked. 'I have never asked you where your home was.'

'We do not have a home in quite the same way as you have,' he said. His face lit up, he almost sparkled. 'I was born in Leningrad. That is one of the most cultured cities in the whole of the U.S.S.R.'

'Do you have a, er . . .' Suzette nearly said 'a house', but altered it hastily to 'room'. He shook his head.

'I have not been back there for years. We have to go where there is the greatest need for our services. Now, for instance, perhaps a certain town in the Urals may need engineers, so we go there. When that job is done, we would be sent somewhere else.'

Suzette was appalled. 'You mean you have no choice as to where you live?'

'Certainly not,' said Serge. 'One is working for a better world. It would be selfish to consider oneself first. Selfishness is a crime against the State.'

'But Serge! How can you ever love your home, your own corner—watch your plants grow in a garden somewhere? However small, you lavish love on a home and garden, just as

you do on your child. We shall surely give love and care to our child, and that will not be selfish—or will it?’ She paused.

Serge was looking at her, smiling indulgently now. ‘My dearest,’ he said, ‘my beautiful Suzette, your horizons are narrow. Go to your lessons, and you will learn that the whole of Russia is your home. That the street outside the house where you live is your home, to be shared with your comrades. Our great Comrade Stalin will see that love and care will be lavished on our little son, and that he will be a good Russian, with his talents used to the utmost.’

Suzette thought of Stalin’s dark, crafty, inscrutable face. She certainly could not feel the same urge of affection for him as her husband. Was Serge aware of the many harsh crimes which the world laid at Stalin’s door? She did not dare to ask him. She felt again the same uneasy loneliness which had dogged her since Etien’s death.

‘Perhaps I can learn to think in the same way as Serge,’ she thought. ‘Perhaps my thoughts really are unworthy and selfish.’ She tried to convince herself, and in the days and months which followed, she made a great effort to see things through Serge’s eyes.

In spite of her doubts and fears, Suzette was gloriously happy with her son. Often, as she held him on her lap, she would look at him with something near to worship. He was life’s miracle in his baby perfection. She was happy that he would not experience the poverty of her own early years, thanks to Etien—or would he? The fact that she had money of her own and a comfortably organized life seemed to annoy Serge.

It was not that his love was lessening; rather, it seemed more fierce, most possessive, since the birth of the baby.

Ilytsin was unexpectedly fond of the small boy. He brought him a small toy, which he himself had carved out of wood—it was a model aeroplane. The child was really too young for it, but he adored it. Ilytsin had painted it red and yellow—the child loved the gay colours, and continually tried to stuff it into his mouth.

The baby was now crawling, and beginning already to look more like a small boy.

Suzette had gone back to her singing. In the first few months she had wanted only the joy of being with her child and Serge, but now something deeper urged her to use her voice again. She had several engagements to sing at military camps, and also for the Air Force. It was exciting to find that all her dresses fitted her now.

She practised every day, and it brought back vivid memories of Madame von Wagenstrate. 'One of these days I will write to her,' thought Suzette to herself. But the days passed and she put it off, for there were other things to do as well as singing exercises. She had to take her Russian lessons, and now also lessons in what could only be called indoctrination.

Latsky often cross-examined her. She found the secret of pleasing him was to reel out the clichés. Her memory was excellent after the intensive training she had had with Madame von Wagenstrate. Latsky was well pleased in what he called her 'progress in right thinking'.

'It is the negation of thinking,' thought Suzette, 'Any slight deviation from the horrible platitudes, the outworn slogans, the meaningless talk of workers' freedom, would be pounced upon by Latsky as heresy. Why can't they wake up to the fact that the world has moved on outside the boundaries of Russia? They are fighting a battle which has been won thirty years ago in the capitalist world. How could Latsky know that the workers in other countries had a far higher standard of living, and more freedom, if he had never been to those countries?'

But Suzette never revealed these thoughts to Latsky. Months earlier she had defied him in an argument. His granite-hard, good-looking features had registered intense annoyance. Afterwards, Ilytsin came to see her.

'Suzette, my dear,' he said, 'be careful what you say to Latsky. He is a dangerous man. I am fond of you and Serge, and I would hate anything you said in all innocence to harm you later on when you come to Russia.'

Suzette studied Ilytsin's homely features, to try and guess

whether Ilytsin's advice was prompted by his natural concern as a friend to avoid any unpleasantness. But no, he was really concerned. As if reading her thoughts, he added, 'You could have *serious* trouble. Our world is different from your own, where you can say and do practically anything you like. Our country has many enemies, and we are far more sensitive to criticism. It is at the same time our strength and our weakness that we cannot take criticism even from our friends.'

'What could happen,' asked Suzette, 'if Latsky reported unfavourably on our marriage?'

'Don't say such a thing,' said Ilytsin. 'You could find that you were buried in some small provincial town, where Serge would be doomed to a job without prospects. You could be made miserable in a thousand different ways. You could be given dreary, inconvenient housing, in what you would regard as a slum. Serge could be practically forced to divorce you.'

'But on what grounds?'

The baby crawled to Ilytsin before he could answer Suzette and tried to pull himself up on his solid little legs. He gurgled happily. Ilytsin looked down at him and tickled the baby, who sat down suddenly, the strength going out of his legs. His comical look of surprise was followed by the familiar baby expression of wondering whether to laugh or cry.

Suzette picked up the wooden aeroplane and waved it in front of Ilya's face. Instantly, his hand reached out for his beloved toy.

Ilytsin got up. The baby had ended the conversation. 'I must go,' he said. 'Serge may be coming in soon. Don't tell him that I have mentioned this,' he added hastily, 'or even that I have been here.'

When Ilytsin had gone, Suzette felt worried and restless, even trapped and frightened. What kind of future could a foreign-born wife hope to have in Russia? She could offend in so many ways, without even knowing she did so. Her life would be a continuous effort of trying to emulate a way of life which repelled her the more she knew of it.

Serge arrived later, after the child had been put to bed. He

was even more affectionate than usual, and his love temporarily took the doubt from her mind.

The next day she was performing at a concert for the Air Force, and she had bought a new dress. Her first impulse had been to show it to Serge. She went to the cupboard to find her Paisley shawl which he had given her. She looked at the shimmering brocade dress with its matching wrap, and reached for the hanger to bring it out to show it to him, but then she stopped. When she turned back into the room without the dress, Serge was struck with the sad look in her face.

'What is the matter, darling?' he asked. How could she tell him? She was not only sad because she dared not show him the expensive dress. She was sad and fearful for their future life together, and for the future of her child.

'Serge,' she asked suddenly, 'what kind of life shall we have in Russia?'

He was puzzled. 'Why do you ask?'

'I am frightened. It all seems so different. You see, I have been poor,' she said, 'and I have only just left all those hardships behind.'

'There will be hardships,' he said. 'We are bound to have them. There must be privation because of the poor. We shall work together and know that we are helping to build up a life for the future.'

'But our son?' said Suzette. 'May he go later to France and America? May he travel with us everywhere?'

'We shall not travel—any of us,' said Serge, 'only within the U.S.S.R., unless it is considered desirable for our country that we should go abroad.'

'But we shall be prisoners.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he said angrily, 'Russia is immense. Besides, our son will have his duties mapped out for him from his earliest days. What kind of example do you think it would be to other people if our son did not follow the same pattern of life as other children? He would be a misfit.'

Suzette started to cry. The word 'misfit' conjured up a picture of things to come. It seemed to her the most natural thing

in the world that a mother should have something to say about her child's education. That it should be otherwise was a fact she could not tolerate.

'You will have to forget all these dangerous ideas of yours.' He was cross with her now, and she said no more.

The day of the concert Serge did not arrive home at the usual time. Most probably he had known yesterday evening that he would be on duty. Why couldn't he have told her? Suzette felt herself becoming impatient again. She was in a better humour only when she was dressed ready to go out. The shimmering silver dress and wrap was the very epitome of everything that her world stood for. It was anathema of the Russian way of life. Defiantly, she called to the nurse to get her a taxi. She was still seething with anger at the whole system of her husband's country. There was fear, too, in her anger. She had so desperately wanted someone of her own to love that she had put her head into a noose.

Her voice that night was superb, and she poured her soul into her music. She had no idea who the celebrity was sitting with the Air Commodore, but she was introduced to him after the performance.

'This is Colonel Barnett Townsend of the United States Air Force,' said the Air Commodore.

'Barnett Townsend?' echoed Suzette. 'Why Colonel, you are . . .'

He laughed, and the blue eyes twinkled. 'So you have heard of me?'

'Who hasn't heard of you in the musical world,' she said. 'And now you are in the Air Force. Do you still devote time to the Metropolitan Opera House in New York?'

'How did you know about that?' he asked.

'I was once engaged to Etien du Pont,' she said.

'That was sad,' he said sympathetically. 'We just could not believe Etien was dead. We knew him well at the Met. But now . . .' He took Suzette's arm. 'Air Commodore, do you mind if I have a few words with this lady? Where can we go to sit down and talk?'

'What about the Officers' Mess?' said the Air Commodore. 'It will be reasonably quiet there just now.'

'Please join us,' said the Colonel. 'I want to get the reactions of Miss Bois to an idea I had when I heard the reception she got from tonight's audience.'

He looked at Suzette. 'Your voice is outstanding. Your whole performance was brilliant. You have got something which only the finest artistes have. Anyway, let's sit down and start talking.'

They went to the Mess and, over drinks, the Colonel told Suzette what he had on his mind. She listened, asking only a question here and there. She could hardly believe her good fortune. Just when she felt in the lowest ebb of misery, this wonderful thing was happening.

'I would like you to go to New York,' said the Colonel, 'and I will recommend you for a contract with us. They will take my recommendation,' he said, 'so do not worry that you might be going there for nothing.'

Suzette could well believe it. Townsend was a multi-millionaire and benefactor on a large scale in the musical world. But that was not all. He was known to be always searching for exceptional talent, and it was certain that any protégée of his would not be ignored.

'When do I go?' asked Suzette breathlessly.

'Are you in Ensa?' he asked.

'No,' she said. It was on the tip of her tongue to confide in Townsend about her marriage, but suddenly, she stopped. For some reason she felt instinctively she must keep silent about Serge.

She felt dizzy with happiness as she considered what all this would mean. She would be able to take her husband and child with her to the States, so they would be able to live in the West. From what she earned it would be possible to finance him in anything he wanted to do. If he did not want to take her money, she could lend it to him. She had no doubt that he was competent in his job.

The Colonel was still talking. 'Could you leave at once?' he asked.

'Yes, indeed,' said Suzette, 'as soon as it can be arranged.'

She arrived home, breathless with joy. She opened the door of her room, and there was Serge. His tunic was off, and he sat in shirt sleeves. He knew immediately that she had news.

He did not criticize her for the extravagance of the new gown and wrap. She could not have borne it if he had said anything disparaging.

'My beautiful, beautiful wife,' he said, 'you look like a young film star. Now, tell me. I know you are longing to tell me some good news. What has happened?'

'I have had an amazing stroke of good luck,' she said. 'It will affect us all. I hardly know where to begin, it is all so exciting.'

Suzette told the whole story of the concert and how she had sung particularly well that night. She went on to tell him about the offer of the contract.

'And now, darling,' she concluded, 'we can go to America.'

'Have you forgotten that I am in the Army?' said Serge.

'Can't you run away with me?' asked Suzette.

'Are you mad?'

'Well, then, you can join me after the war,' said Suzette. 'The war is surely nearly over. Or do you want *me* to wait until the war is over? If they want me now, they probably will later. I will ask Townsend,' she added.

'You will do no such thing. You are not going.'

Suzette was speechless. He continued, 'If you go, you will go alone. I have no desire whatever to leave my country, or to alter my way of life. It is unthinkable that I should change the purpose and course of my life for the meaningless emptiness of a capitalist country.'

'But Serge, what are you saying? You have never lived anywhere except in Russia. You have been told nothing but lies about the rest of the world.'

Serge grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. Her hair came undone and fell down to cover her face. The baby in the next room started to cry, and Serge let her go at the sound. Suzette pushed the hair from her eyes. She almost hated him.

She turned away to go to the baby, and left Serge alone. When she came back he was calmer.

'I am sorry,' he said, 'I did not mean to hurt you, Susutchka. But do not judge Russia until you have been there.'

'But Serge, we owe it to our child to give him the best that he can have.'

'Then you cannot think of taking him to America,' said Serge. 'I will not have our son brought up in a degenerate system of capitalist society.'

Suzette groaned inwardly. In the year or two of her marriage there was a whole list of words which filled her with nausea and loathing. 'Imperialist aggressors'—'capitalist degeneracy'—'collectivism'—'co-operatives'. It was no use speaking to Serge any more, she decided. At least not that night. She must wait for a more propitious occasion, and then try to persuade him with every means in her power.

'Suzette, you have a great responsibility, not only to me and the child,' he went on. 'Your glorious voice belongs to the workers of Russia, who are waiting to welcome their foreign comrade.'

Suzette shuddered at the thought of the waiting, welcoming arms, handcuffs at the ready to restrict her freedom. Not only freedom of movement, but freedom of thought.

The next day, Serge spent with Suzette and the baby. She did not mention the contract again until the afternoon. She longed for him to speak of it first, but it was almost as though he was determined to ignore the subject—as though it had never happened. Suzette steeled herself.

'Serge, I want you to reconsider what we were talking about last night.'

He had his arm round her waist. Now he took it away, as though he could not bear the slightest physical contact as she talked.

'I thought I told you that the subject was ended. I don't want to hear another word about it.'

'You must listen to me,' said Suzette desperately. 'Please, Serge.'

'You knew that I would want you to live in Russia when we were married. You are a cheat,' he spat at her.

'I could bear poverty for myself, because I love you,' she said, 'but I cannot bear my child to be doomed to it.'

Serge controlled his temper. In a changed voice he answered her, 'There are other forms of poverty besides the physical. America may, as everyone contends, have every kind of physical luxury, but mentally they are impoverished.'

'It is not true, Serge. If they are so impoverished, how can they even have opera houses, museums, universities?'

'They do it just out of snobbery. They do it in the same way and in the same spirit as the Romans with their circuses. To distract the minds of the people from the wrongs done to them.'

'You are talking nonsense yourself,' said Suzette, 'but let us be reasonable. Come with me to America, and if you don't like the life we will go back to Russia and live there.'

'That is impossible,' Serge answered flatly. 'You should know by now that we would be regarded as enemies of the State.'

'The State!' shouted Suzette furiously, her gentleness dropping from her. 'I am sick to death of hearing of "The State". You are a human being, have you forgotten? You have a right . . .' But even as she shouted, and cross as she was, she stopped. What 'right' was she talking about? To Serge 'right' was 'The State'. A human being was to him a mere cog in the machinery of the U.S.S.R.

There was a tap at the door. It was Latsky. Suzette, who went to let him in, looked up at the beautiful, cruel face. She fancied she saw a look of triumph in the light-coloured oriental-shaped eyes, but his voice as he greeted her was calm, non-committal. She could not be really sure how much he had heard of their quarrel. Possibly he had been outside several minutes, waiting for the chance to come in when the argument was at its most heated point, when one could practically see and hear the racing heartbeats of the contestants.

Serge, Suzette noted dispassionately, had two spots of angry colour on his cheekbones. He was tense and nervous. She went to the other room where the baby lay in his cot. He was asleep,

with the red aeroplane which Ilytsin had made him next to his chubby cheek. She wondered whether she should take it from the clinging baby fingers, in case he scratched himself with it. No, she would leave him with his toy. However gently she took it from him, he might wake up.

The nurse was out. She had gone to see her cousin who lived in the country, but was supposed to be back in another hour. Suzette looked at her watch to check the time. How late it was. 'I will have to get dressed immediately,' she thought. She was singing that evening again for the Air Force. What a blessing that Serge was home and could watch the baby until the nurse's return.

Suzette came back to the other room. They had been talking in Russian, but as she entered, their conversation ceased abruptly. Serge looked distraught, Latsky as inscrutable as ever. Suzette said, in French, for it was still unnatural for her to speak Russian to Serge, 'Will you be in, dearest, until the nurse comes back? Don't leave the baby alone.'

Serge shook his head in answer, as though he could not trust himself to speak. She walked to the cupboard in the corner and selected a dress, shoes and bag. She would change in the nursery. She went to Serge and kissed him in front of Latsky, a long, passionate, tender kiss, which he returned with warmth. She left the room, and decided she would not go back to say goodbye. It would delay her, and she had the feeling that Latsky wanted some sort of private conference with Serge. She had no wish to interrupt it. She had already learned that Latsky was immensely suspicious, and now that she understood Russian fairly well, she did not want to let him think that she was eavesdropping.

Suzette dressed quickly, folded her clothes neatly, and kissed her little son gently on his downy cheek. The child smiled happily, but did not awaken. She tiptoed out of the room and down the stairs.

Suzette was met by the Air Commodore as she arrived at the concert hall. This was a very unusual honour, rarely given to a performer.

'Our visitor of yesterday told me the good news. Congratulations.' Barr shook Suzette's hand. 'I am delighted for you,' he said. 'I shall be so proud to say I knew you.'

Barr was not to know that in two days his plane, which was taking him to Cairo, would crash into the sea.

Suzette sang mechanically that night. Her mind was too distracted by the quarrel with Serge to allow her to give of her best. Very few people would have been aware of it for, as usual, her technique made up for the deficiencies. She received an enormous amount of applause, not only because of her performance, but also because of her beauty. Her audience, composed of men in the Forces, naturally appreciated seeing such a dazzling beauty.

The concert ended. 'Have a drink with us before you go,' said Barr, but Suzette, pleading tiredness, declined. She hurried home in a taxi, feeling strangely uneasy. She paid off her driver and bounded up the stairs. There was no sound from either room, although both lights were on.

She flung open the door of her room. It was empty. She ran to the other, her fear mounting, she knew not why. The nurse sat calmly knitting in an armchair. Mechanically, Suzette noted the wooden aeroplane on the pillow of the empty crib.

'Where is Ilya?'

'His father took him out, Madame. Do you feel quite well? You look so pale. What is the matter?'

Suzette screamed. She knew what had happened without enquiring further. The nurse, alarmed, put her hand on Suzette's arm. She tore away and ran into the other room. There was a note on the table in the corner, addressed to her in Serge's strange, foreign-looking handwriting. She ripped open the envelope with trembling fingers, and read:

'My beloved darling,

Forgive me for doing what I have to do. I love you with my whole heart, and hate myself for hurting you, but it is the only way. It is my duty to take Ilya to Russia. He will be looked after well, and have the finest education in the world. He will lose his wonderful mother, and I my beautiful, talented wife.

Again, forgive me. Our marriage may be considered a mistake, but the memory of you will be treasured as long as I live.'

Suzette continued to cry and scream hysterically. The nurse ran for a doctor, leaving her bereaved mistress clutching the little wooden aeroplane, as if it were the last link with her son in the world.

Chapter Nine

SUZETTE sat in her room with Ilytsin on the opposite side of the table. She had seen nothing of Serge or Latsky or any of the other Russians for months, but now Ilytsin was paying her a surprise visit. Quietly, the large man had eased himself into the room as if he feared to be seen with her.

'I was asked to deliver this to you when I reached Teheran,' he said, giving her a document. 'My comrades, although they did not expressly say so, would expect me to have posted it. I wanted to see you, to give you messages which dare not be written. Serge is well, although he misses you. And the baby is thriving. He walks and talks now.'

Suzette openly wept. And now, as she sat with Ilytsin, she tore open the envelope. It contained her divorce papers. If it had not been so very tragic, it would have been funny. The grounds for divorce were stated—'Lack of mutual political understanding.'

'Is this legal?' she asked Ilytsin.

'I am afraid so,' he answered sadly.

'Oh, why did this have to happen?' asked Suzette, turning to Ilytsin. 'You are kind and humane. Do you approve of this?' She tapped the document with her fingers.

Ilytsin moved uneasily on his chair. 'My dear Suzette,' he said, 'you are the victim of an inflexible system, which does

not take human beings into account. At the moment our system is harsh, though basically it has much to commend it.' He paused, as though fearful, even in private, to criticize the regime. 'One day, perhaps, Comrade Stalin will be replaced. There are many of us, especially those who have been to other countries, who long for liberalization.'

Ilytsin gazed into space. He was preoccupied with thoughts which he could not, or dared not, express. Suzette brought him back from his reverie.

'Tell me, what is going to happen to Ilya? Who looks after him?'

'Don't worry about him,' said Ilytsin. 'Serge has made friends with an important Party Member. The mother of the Party Member, who is a grandmother, is looking after Ilya.'

Ilytsin laughed. His laugh was unaffected and his ugly face became attractive.

'Do you know what is one of the great pillars of strength of the mighty Soviet Union?' Suzette shook her head. 'The grandmothers. Our labour force is composed not only of men, but also of women, liberated from the chores of motherhood by the grandmothers, who find usefulness and fulfilment in their later years. Women get equal pay for equal work.'

'Why couldn't Serge have come with me?' asked Suzette.

'It was just not possible. He would never be able to settle down in a society other than the one he knows.'

'But how could he kidnap our child? What kind of man is he?'

'It is a terrible grief for you now,' said Ilytsin. He patted Suzette's tightly clenched hand which lay on top of the table. 'You are young, and you will gradually get over the sorrow.'

'I will never get over it,' she said vehemently.

'You will. Human beings get over grief which they think will fill their whole existence. You will go to America, and you will become a great opera star.'

'But what does that mean to me? It means nothing unless I can help my child. All the fame, all the money, all the glamour

and excitement—I would exchange it all for my husband and child.'

Ilystin shook his head. 'No, my dear, you would not. Your sense of duty makes you say the conventional thing. It is much better to have parted from Serge when you were both so terribly in love, than to have waited until you hated one another bitterly. The end would have been the same, for you could not have stayed together. To be frank, Serge would have found this marriage a tremendous handicap. Even the most innocent action would have seemed suspicious to others. Your beautiful clothes, for instance, your chic. You are so different from Russian women—dangerously different.'

'What are Russian women like, then?'

'They are far more masculine, for one thing. They have very little time for cosmetics and clothes, or even for their homes. They are career people. Yet they spend many hours in queues—Russian women have to queue for almost everything, and it leaves them very little time at home.'

'So life really is composed of work and sleep?'

'Not entirely. Culture flourishes. When first things have been accomplished, life will inevitably become easier. We shall then start having the luxuries which other countries have, but we will be far, far ahead of them in every way. Most of the people in other countries don't deserve their luxuries. They have them far too soon before they have attained true maturity. To give those without intelligence luxuries for which they are not ready, is to court disaster. They are bored and gluttoned, utterly spoiled. Humanity must always have something to work towards, and some reward for effort. No effort—no reward.' He got up ready to go.

'When are you leaving?' he asked Suzette.

'I am still waiting for a ship. Transportation is not easy in war-time.'

He paused in the doorway. 'You have never told anyone of your marriage?' he asked. She shook her head. 'I think you are wise.'

Suzette tried to delay him a little longer. He was her last link

with Serge and Ilya. Ilytsin understood what was going on in the turmoil of Suzette's mind. He said cautiously, 'I will try to send you news in some way or other of them both. Do not expect regular letters. It would be dangerous for me, or anyone else, to communicate openly with you. But I shall find a way.'

He seized Suzette's hand and kissed it. And then he was gone. Slowly she came back into her room, closing the door softly behind her and leaning against it. Even in the rigid regimentation of Soviet society, it had been impossible to destroy kindness. Ilytsin was kind, perhaps too kind for his own good.

Suzette went to the wardrobe and took out a cardboard box. Inside was the red and yellow aeroplane. She took it out, and looked at it sadly. She was glad that she did not have to sing that evening. She could afford the luxury of crying herself to sleep.

Three weeks later she heard the good news. She had a passage for New York, if she could reach Cairo in time to pick up her reserved ticket. From there Barnett Townsend had made arrangements for her to travel by ship to San Francisco.

With the help of her Greek nanny, she managed to get aboard a Cairo boat. The girl's brother was a sailor, who had a half share in a small craft which traded from Persia as far as Suez. Suzette could hardly believe her good fortune, for passages even on the smallest boats were being sold for fantastic prices. She was happy she would be able to afford it, thanks to Etien. How many times she thanked his memory in her life!

'How much do I owe you?' she asked the brother, as they made the arrangements for her journey. He and his sister spoke in Greek, then he turned to Suzette and said, 'Please let us do this as a gift to a visitor in this country.'

Suzette was overwhelmed at their kindness. The Greeks may be astute business men, but they are wonderfully hospitable and generous too.

She packed her belongings, said goodbye to her friends, and left Teheran, feeling that she was leaving a way of life behind

her. It was almost as though she was emigrating to another planet. The future was indeed another chapter, another world. The ill-fated marriage was an episode in her life which must be forever hidden, for her own safety as much as for that of her son and his father. How absurd it was. But for the war she and Serge would never have met. But for the war, Etien would have been travelling with her as husband and manager. They would have been honoured and famous. They could have made visits to Mademoiselle Herge and her mother, who would have been proudly collecting albums of press cuttings as a record of Suzette's career. Instead of that, all three were dead through the gross stupidity of war.

The paranoid little man with the comedian's hair style and moustache had the whole world by the nose. How many million lives had been ruined by this one madman? If she had not been so desperately lonely, perhaps she would not have rushed into marriage with Serge. And yet she had felt overwhelming sexual attraction for him. But it was not that alone, or the desire to have one person of her own to love. Serge had intelligence and goodness too. He was good in the most old-fashioned sense of the word.

Suzette wondered often what Serge was thinking and suffering—his soul must have been literally torn apart. The conflict of his duty to the State and to his wife and child could give him no rest, she was certain.

She arrived in Cairo after an uneventful journey, so much simpler than the other two war-time journeys she had undertaken. In Cairo she waited only a few days before she managed to get on board a ship.

Eventually Suzette arrived in San Francisco. They sailed past the Golden Gate bridge one hazy morning in April, and disembarked in the early hours. There was a cool clamminess in the air, not unlike England.

It was her first visit to the States. It was an exciting experience to get away from the oppressive memories of the past.

Suzette decided that she would stay for three days in the

city before she left for New York. She mostly spent her time going on foot from shop to shop in the steep streets—so steep that many of the sidewalks had grooves on the pavement. Often she walked so far that she would have to taxi back to her hotel. She literally held her breath when she came to the highest point of a hill before plunging down into the street the other side.

The cable cars were another feature of the city, and often, just for the experience, she would travel on one with her packages back to her room.

She visited the Chinese part of the city, which was just like another country. It was China itself. The prosperous world of thrifty, hard-working merchants; the pretty girls in Cheongsams—that seductive garment of the East, with its demure high neck and provocatively split skirt; its studious-looking young men. All this fascinated her. She treated herself to many exotic meals in the Chinese quarter, though often she wished that these outings were not made alone. If only they could have been shared with Serge! Where was he, she wondered.

When she thought of Ilya, it was like a physical blow to her stomach. A pang in her which seared and tore at the same time. The longing for her little son came back every time she came into the hotel bedroom, almost expecting to hear Ilya's gurgle of greeting. By now there would have been words of welcome, for he would have learned to talk. She would often put her packages down unopened on the bed and weep, the pleasure of shopping and new sights forgotten in an agony of loss. At these times her love for Serge turned to hatred. Why had he made her suffer like this? And it was only when she had exhausted herself with weeping that she would once more absolve him from blame.

He was as much a victim as she was, compelled to a course of action which was alien to him. She remembered how he had spoiled and fussed over her when she was pregnant. She remembered his tenderness to her when she had come home tired, but triumphant, from her singing. They had spent rela-

tively little time together in the year or two of their marriage, as the war had constantly separated them.

She asked herself several times whether she should not take steps to go to Russia, but the thought of such a move terrified her. She could have got over the terror and joined Serge, but common sense prevailed. The words of Ilytsin haunted her: 'You could not have stayed together. To be frank, Serge would have found this marriage a tremendous handicap.' Not only Serge, but her child too. Her presence by their side would have damned all that Serge strived to do.

At last the three days were up, and Suzette boarded a train. She forgot her troubles with the distractions of new sensations and new sights.

They journeyed over the vast expanse of America; the golden prairie land, vast forest lands with mountains in the distance—up to the industrial middle-west and north.

Many of the passengers talked to her in the open, friendly manner which Americans show to visitors in their country. Some of them warned her that New Yorkers were stand-offish, but later Suzette was to disagree with this. Everyone, wherever she went, was charming and friendly.

At last they steamed into the station at New York. She found it very different from San Francisco. Even before the train came to a standstill, and as Suzette gazed out of the window, she could see and feel the difference. The faces of the people were tense and hunted, as though some built-in clock on the verge of sounding its alarm drove each one forward. That was it. Twenty-four hours a day was just too little time for the million-and-one tasks, the constant struggle for survival, and the fierce competition of getting ahead.

What would happen to someone really old, she wondered. She could not imagine dear old Mademoiselle Herge ponderously moving through the crowd of pushing, jostling people.

A large coloured porter commandeered her and her luggage. His voice had the rich, dark, velvety tones of his race, which made musical even the most commonplace utterance.

'Where to, lady?' he asked, but before she could reply she

was greeted by Barnett Townsend, who was accompanied by two men and a woman. Suzette greeted Townsend first and waited to be introduced to the other three, but on looking more closely at the woman she was overwhelmed with a sudden joy. It was the familiar face of her teacher and friend, Madame von Wagenstrate.

Suzette hugged her. Both she and Madame began to weep and laugh at the same time.

'My dear, dear Suzette,' said Madame. 'What have you been doing, and where have you been, all this long, long time? I wrote to your mother and Mademoiselle Herge several times, and had no reply.'

'Didn't you know that they had both been killed in an air raid?'

Madame von Wagenstrate was stricken with horror. 'My poor, dear child,' she cried, 'what a terrible tragedy. And on top of the death of Etien! How unhappy you must have been.'

'And on top of that my divorce and the loss of my child,' thought Suzette, but she said nothing. She turned her head away so that the others might not see the spasm of pain and despair which crossed her face. When she had gained control, she turned back to them.

'It is all over now,' she said, and then, changing the subject, 'Tell me, is your sister with you?'

'Yes,' said Madame. 'We decided to move out of France when the war looked like lasting a long time. We escaped into Spain and made our way here to our friends in New York.'

'I was working in Ensa until, until . . .' Suzette hesitated. The others waited for her to finish. She ended, 'I was ill.' After all, one could regard childbirth as a sort of illness. In that moment, she realized even more finally how she could never admit to her marriage, not even to Madame, who was certainly one of her best and truest friends.

Townsend guided the party towards the exit, expertly threading his way through the crowds of bustling New Yorkers. Suzette was naively excited at the way the doors at Grand Central Station opened by remote control. The people passing

through the doorways broke an invisible ray which closed or opened them. To the amusement of the passers-by, she went through three or four times before she would leave the station.

Townsend was delighted at the happy, unaffected charm of Suzette—so different from the egocentric and temperamental behaviour of some of his other stars. He thought to himself, 'If that warmth comes across the footlights, she will have a devoted following of several millions. But that warmth *does* come across,' he continued his train of thought. 'After all, I have seen her perform. Large or small, an audience is an audience.'

They reached the Waldorf, where Townsend had reserved a suite for Suzette. She exclaimed at the sumptuous luxury of the rooms—a vast bedroom, charming sitting room and a terrace.

'This must cost a fortune,' she said.

'It is important for your career to live like this,' said Townsend, 'you will have to give press conferences soon, and you will be the centre of attraction wherever you go.'

Madame von Wagenstrate agreed. 'An opera star has the elements of royalty. She is not only an artiste, but she is the fairy-tale princess to millions of human beings, who associate themselves with her in imagination. Yes, the world still loves glamour, and why shouldn't it?'

Suzette thought what a different attitude of mind this was from all she had heard of Serge's country. And yet there must be millions of Russians who shared that basic need of humanity—to identify itself with the romantic and the colourful.

That was perhaps why Serge had found her irresistible. Resolutely, she put him out of her mind. He must be forgotten.

She walked out on to the terrace, and looked down at New York. Compared with other cities she had known, it was an alien world, its architecture resembling some weird edifices of another planet. It was almost strange to see ordinary human beings swarming in the streets. They should have been creatures like insects or octopi.

Madame von Wagenstrate now came out on the balcony to

join her. 'You have grown up, Suzette,' she said. 'You are outwardly the same gentle girl, but there is steel beneath the gentleness. What has happened since we last met? Will you tell me?'

Suzette smiled uneasily. Surely her teacher could not sense all that she had been through?

'One must become strong, otherwise life can crush one,' she answered mechanically. She could almost have been repeating some of her indoctrination in Teheran. How easy it was to fall into a way of thought, and to use certain words!

If Madame sensed that Suzette was keeping anything back from her, she gave no sign of it. Suzette ordered coffee, and Townsend, guessing that the two friends must have many things to talk about, tactfully left them alone. He took the other two men away with him, having arranged that he would call on Suzette the next day and discuss their plans.

The two women talked together, but although Suzette mentioned Teheran she said not a word of all that had happened to her there. Madame asked many questions. She even, delicately, asked Suzette whether she had found anyone to take Etien's place. Suzette shook her head.

'There have been men in my life,' she said, 'but nothing permanent. There was only one Etien, and there will never be another like him.' She sighed. 'Perhaps that is the only perfect love. The love that is remembered after death.'

'Oh, no!' cried Madame. 'You are much too young to talk so cynically. To me, love is important when it is in the present.'

Suzette laughed. 'You talk like a man.'

'No, I am an incurable romantic. Nothing would please me more than to see you happily married to some adoring man.'

'I don't want to get married,' said Suzette. 'I couldn't bear it.'

To Suzette's relief, Madame imagined that it was because of Etien's memory that she was so vehement, so she left it at that. It had given her a clue to a way of disguising her more recent sorrow. If she felt unable to control her feelings, she could always say that the memory of Etien still haunted her.

Suzette spent that first day in New York, after Madame von

Wagenstrate had left, in resting. She had all her meals in her room, then slept for twelve hours, and the next morning she felt fresh and vivacious, eager to live again.

During the morning Townsend telephoned her from the lobby. The arrangement had been that he should call for her and introduce her to the Director of the Metropolitan Opera House. After the formal introductions, she was taken on stage. The vast interior of the opera house had the ghostly, romantic yet dusty atmosphere of a theatre when not in use. Her footsteps echoed on the bare boards as she crossed the stage. There was a rehearsal in progress of *Turandot*.

'Have you ever sung the part of *Turandot*?'

'No,' said Suzette, 'but I know at least one song, the aria, *Signore ascota*.'

She stood alone in the centre of the dim stage and started to sing. There had been a murmur of sound before she started, but suddenly even the performers who were rehearsing were quiet. As she came to the end, they applauded her enthusiastically, and she felt as proud and happy as though the theatre had been full. Suddenly she knew that they had accepted her, and there was no need to worry.

The others crowded around her, bombarding her with questions. 'Where were you trained? Where have you sung?' Suzette laughingly tried to answer them.

Viedmont, the Director, shook her hand. 'We are so proud to have you here. We are so delighted. It seems incredible that you have never appeared in a big opera house before. You will be our discovery, one of our graduates in the world of music.'

He rubbed his hands together acquisitively, as though Suzette had been a rare stamp and he a philatelist.

'Will you sing something else for us?' he said. So Suzette sang Lucia's *Mad Scene* in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. She was a fine actress, and even without costume or scenery she swept her audience with her to the misty and threatening moors of Scotland. It was a sort of witchcraft, this creation of a scene from sheer music alone; the power and magic of her voice and personality.

She was led away after the outburst of clapping to the Director's office. Behind her, she could hear Townsend and Viedmont in close conversation. When they were all seated, with Viedmont at his desk in the position of authority, she she knew that a decision had been reached. 'Such a momentous decision,' she thought to herself. She was conscious of a tense excitement in the room.

'We have made an unprecedented decision,' announced Viedmont. 'We are going to give you a starring part, something which has rarely happened to a newcomer. Your voice is so unique that we will not waste time in giving you minor roles. How soon do you think you could learn the part of Lakmé?'

Suzette answered with another question, almost as Etien might have done. 'When is it due to begin?'

The Director told her. 'Five weeks from now.'

Suzette was not discouraged by the lack of time.

'Think you can do it?' asked Townsend.

'I can do it,' she said with confidence. 'Especially with Madame von Wagenstrate here to help. I am not in the least alarmed by the time you are allowing me.'

'And now about the announcements in the press. We are going to start a full-scale publicity campaign for you,' said Viedmont. 'There is only one little thing that worries us—we should like to change your name. There is already a fine singer, Lily Bois, in the company.'

'You have the voice of a lark,' said Townsend. 'I think you should have something less anonymous than Suzette Bois. Say,' he said, 'that's not a bad idea. What is "lark" in French?'

'Alouette.'

'That sounds fine. You should be "L'Alouette" from the start. You don't need a surname.'

'No, that is still not quite right,' Viedmont objected.

'Let us think about it' said Suzette. She had no objection to changing her name, for it was an added protection in hiding her ill-fated marriage.

Finally, they decided that she should keep the name 'Suzette', but her surname was changed to 'Breval'.

Chapter Ten

IT was five weeks later. Suzette, who had been so confident and calm about learning the part of Lakmé for her début, felt ill with fright. If she could have sneaked out of the famous Room No. 10 in the opera house, she would have done so, and lost herself among the teeming millions of people in New York.

By tradition, Room No. 10 was the dressing room of the prima donnas. All the great singers since the early days of the Met. had used this dingy, badly ventilated room. Its many mirrors reflected Suzette's image, or rather that of Lakmé. Suzette's great eyes stared back at herself in terror. She saw the frightened face of a highly-born Indian girl, dressed in an exquisite pale blue sari.

Madame von Wagenstrate had been with her all afternoon. She had persuaded Suzette to take a warm bath, then made her lie down to rest instead of pacing up and down the room in her nervousness.

Suzette, who had felt that she would be unable to sleep for days, dozed as she lay under the coverlet. She was quite surprised when Madame came in with coffee on a tray. She sat up sleepily, and drank her coffee, clasping the quilt around her.

'My voice has gone,' she whispered. 'I beg you to call Townsend and tell him I cannot sing tonight.'

'You can and will sing,' said Madame sternly. 'There is nothing wrong with your voice—only with your courage.'

Suzette sipped her coffee, and shivered. Madame relented, and smiled indulgently at her favourite pupil. 'We *all* feel like this when we sing at the Met. for the first time. Cheer up. This time tomorrow you will be well on the way to fame.'

'I may equally well be on the way down, after all these years of hope and preparation. What if I don't justify the confidence of you and Etien?'

Madame ignored the question. 'Have another coffee?'

Suzette nodded dumbly. How she had come to be in Room No. 10 was like a jumbled nightmare, and odd little memories kept coming back to her.

Now she was dressed at last, and sat waiting for the call boy to come to her door. At last, she heard his knock. She leapt out of her hard chair, and walked across the room. The garish lights, reflected in the many mirrors, winked back at her sardonically. She followed the boy towards the stage. There was no turning back, and now she felt a sudden surge of defiance.

'What if I do fail? They cannot kill me.' She felt a gentle push in her back, and then she was on the stage. The defiance and courage of her present mood now transformed her.

The audience saw a slim Indian girl of almost ethereal beauty. Then, unbelievably, from this slight, delicate figure came a tumultuous voice which held them enthralled.

The moment she started singing, Suzette was completely possessed by her part. She was not singing Lakmé, she *was* Lakmé. The audience adored her, and gave her a tremendous ovation. They would not let her go, and she had to come back again and again to bow.

It was a triumph for Suzette, but it was also a victory for Townsend, the man who had introduced her to New York. There was no doubt about it, his and Etien's judgement had been right.

As Suzette took the last curtain alone, she felt like a climber who reaches the summit of the mountain peak. She realized in that moment that life would never be the same again. She

had achieved the isolation of fame, and she was no longer Suzette Bois, but a voice.

Viedmont gave a little speech, in a voice full of pride and excitement, and then Suzette was surrounded by people, being pulled and pushed. In front of her were one or two admirers, carrying the bouquets which had been handed over the foot-lights to her. She found her dressing room transformed too. No longer was it a dingy, drab room, but the dressing room of a prima donna. She had to push her way through the baskets and bouquets of flowers. The air was heavy with their perfume. The room was full of people, journalists, photographers, sponsors of the opera, other performers.

Madame von Wagenstrate, laughing and crying, pressed Suzette to her ample bosom. She had reverted to German in her excitement. Everyone was talking at once, congratulating, complimenting, eager to say even a few words to Suzette, to touch her arm, as though she could give them some meritorious quality like a king of old.

Suzette was exhausted, but elated.

'Are you too tired,' asked Townsend, 'to come to the party we have arranged in your honour?'

'No,' answered Suzette, 'I would not miss that for anything in the world.'

Madame and the dresser persuaded some of the guests to leave, but it was impossible to clear the room entirely. Suzette went behind the screen and changed into her evening gown of gold lamé. She wore the gold necklace which Serge had clasped around her neck so many years ago. Her thoughts were full of him, in spite of herself. If only he had been there to see her triumph. What would he have thought of New York, she wondered. Would it really have been such an alien world for him?

Having changed, she walked from behind the screen, and took off a little of her stage make-up. Then she was ready.

Townsend and Madame, with some of the performers, left the theatre at the same time. At the doorway, Suzette was met by two burly men.

'We can take you out now,' one of them said.

'But I don't understand,' answered Suzette.

Townsend laughed. 'You are going to be mobbed by your admirers,' he said. 'From today, you have a following of fans.'

The door was opened, and Suzette emerged. It was like being supported by two lifeguards in a sea of bobbing faces. There were screams of excitement as people caught sight of her. She was pushed in the direction of her car by the two men. A book was thrust under her nose by an autograph hunter, but one of the guards said, 'Don't stop now, Honey—they'll kill you if you start to sign.'

Suzette reached the safety of the car at last. She was laughing and breathless. There was a groan from the fans as the car shot forward into the traffic. They went only two blocks or so to the Savoy Plaza, where they were greeted like royalty. Photographers, tipped off by Townsend, were already waiting for her. She posed for them, smiling and happy.

Then they walked into a gigantic, flower-filled room, where a long table had been set. Suzette sat on Townsend's right, and on her other side sat a stranger to her, solidly built and square faced. He was introduced as Bill Brown. 'Bill "Steely" Brown,' added Townsend, but it meant nothing to Suzette.

The party was gay and lively, everyone talking at once. Suzette talked to the man on her left.

'Why did Mr Townsend call you "Steely"?' she asked.

'That's my business,' answered Brown. Suzette was abashed. It sounded to her as though he was telling her to mind her own business. He laughed, and reassured her.

'I mean that is my business. Oh heck, my job is steel!'

Suzette laughed. He added, 'Never feel you are prying when you ask an American about his work. We love to talk about our jobs.'

'I thought only people in show business liked to do that.'

'Oh no. we industrialists find our work absorbing too.'

Suzette asked him some questions about the steel industry. At first he was a little reluctant to talk, for he feared she might be bored. But she was fascinated. The whole story of the family

fortunes, founded by Brown's grandfather nearly a century ago, held her interest. It was an unknown world to her. She tried to imagine a luxurious childhood of the kind that Bill Brown must have had. It was what Etien had enjoyed, and what she had wanted for Ilya. Sadness and despair filled her once more at the thought of the child, and she sighed deeply.

'What is the matter?' Bill asked her. 'Are you all right? Perhaps you are overtired.'

Suzette shook her head. 'Thank you, I am quite all right,' she said. 'It is nothing really.'

Bill changed the subject, and asked her about her impressions of New York. She talked animatedly once more. The others were all listening to her, and then she got involved in a conversation with Townsend and the lady opposite her, a stunningly dressed matron with lilac coloured hair, whose bosom supported several carats of diamonds in the form of a leaf brooch.

'When you come to Boston,' said this lady, 'you must come and stay with me.' Apparently it was a foregone conclusion that she would go to Boston.

Bill Brown was asking her what she most wanted to see in New York. She answered 'Central Park.'

He was astonished at her reply. 'May I take you there?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Yes, please.'

'I will call for you tomorrow at your hotel. Where are you staying?'

She told him, and said, 'Let's meet before my rehearsal. I would love some fresh air. I feel as though I have been smothered by the theatre, away from normal life. Tomorrow, I want to see grass and trees, after all this tension.'

Bill Brown nodded understandingly, thinking to himself, 'What an extraordinarily unspoiled girl!' She seemed oblivious to the fact that she was the most important person in the room. He was used to women who demanded that money should be spent on them as a sort of tribute. He was a tremendously wealthy man, but he resented such treatment.

'She looks so young, and yet she must be older, for when her face is relaxed there is a strange look of someone who has lived through trouble. And her training,' he thought. 'She must have trained for many years to have reached such perfection.'

The lady with the diamonds was speaking to Suzette again. 'You are a gorgeous actress. Hollywood will be after you. Just wait and see.'

The party finally broke up, and Suzette, exhausted by all the excitement, lay in bed. Just before she went to sleep, she studied the ceiling above her. It was ornate, rich, the ceiling of a luxury room for wealthy people. How different it was from the ceiling of her room as a child, with its brown, damp stains and cracks. She switched off the light, thinking that life had its compensations. It was unbelievable that she could have achieved so much with such a humble beginning. If only her personal life had been as successful.

She dreamed that she was on an enormous stage, singing Lakmé. Her sari kept on unwinding, and she was trying continuously to tuck in the folds at the front. Serge was beside her, and Ilya too, in full view of the audience. Ilya kept interrupting her singing to ask where was the wooden plane? As she sang, she pointed, but the plane had altered its dimensions. Now it was enormous, the size of a real plane. In the pilot's seat sat Ilytsin, beckoning to them frantically. Suzette wanted desperately to run to the plane, and yet stupidly she felt she must finish the aria. She hurried her singing to its conclusion, grabbed the hands of Serge and Ilya, and ran for the plane. As they were about to clamber in, Latsky, looking unbelievably villainous, appeared and barred her way. He had an enormous knife in his hand. He caught her by the throat and tried to plunge the knife into her. She struggled and screamed, appalled at the hatred in his oriental eyes.

She woke up, panting with fear. With tremendous relief she realized that she was in her room in New York. The daylight was pouring through the slats of the venetian blinds. She pressed the bell for room service. The maid opened the cur-

tains and drew the blinds, then brought her breakfast and a pile of newspapers. Excitedly, Suzette turned to the theatre pages, and found to her intense delight that every paper gave her rave reviews. She had arrived.

There was not a single adverse criticism. One critic had written an entire article entitled 'Townsend's Gamble Pays Off.' 'Those of us who came to hear the much-heralded French singer's performance were not disappointed. Suzette Breval has the voice of a lark. She sings effortlessly and is a dramatic actress who can make even the absurdities of operatic stories believable. She is a dazzling beauty, and is slim enough to be a professional model.'

Suzette bathed and dressed. She wore a grey suit, perfectly cut, with hand-made shoes and handbag of the same colour. It was a simple ensemble, but unmistakably Parisienne.

Bill Brown was calling for her at ten o'clock. She wondered idly to herself how he had managed to be free at such a time and not be in some office in Wall Street. She had no idea of the workings of commerce in the States, nor did she know that Brown was a multi-millionaire who could have retired years ago if he had wished to.

If she had known of his tremendous wealth, it would have left her unaffected. Suzette had enough money of her own not to be plagued by too much reverence for it.

Bill Brown was waiting when she came downstairs. She was hatless, and her beautiful black hair was smooth and shining. He was enchanted at her appearance. She looked so different from other women, who all tended to look rather alike with their stylized way of dressing and of doing their hair.

'I suppose you read the newspapers?' he asked, after they had greeted one another.

'It was the first thing I did—even before I drank my orange juice.'

'Our critics certainly like you. Believe me, you've got to be good to get such notices. I have known them murder some singers. Everyone was waiting to see what you were like, and we all thought Townsend was taking a risk to give a newcomer

a starring role. But, gee, that man knows what he's doing. Where did you first meet?'

As they walked down the street, Suzette told him, and soon they reached the park.

'Your folks must be very proud of you,' said Brown.

'I have no family,' said Suzette. 'My father died when I was still at school, and my mother was killed in the war.'

'I am so sorry,' said Brown. 'Forgive me for being so curious, but have you never married?'

Suzette turned her head away until she had mastered the give-away expression on her face. She turned to him. 'My fiancé was killed by the Nazis,' she said.

'That's terrible.' He took her hand, and squeezed it sympathetically. She did not take her hand away, and for a minute or two they walked hand-in-hand as though they had known each other a long time. Strangers looking at them might have thought they were lovers enjoying a stroll.

In the meantime, Suzette was intrigued by the park. Large outcrops of grey rock broke the surface of the emerald grass. Fine trees towered above their heads. It was hard to believe that they were in the middle of a big city. The presence of the rock showed how it had been possible to make the foundations for such a city of skyscrapers, Bill Brown explained.

Suzette was enchanted by the sight of the squirrels, with their fluffy grey tails and shining dark eyes. A woman sat on a bench feeding the small, tame animals, which took the food fearlessly from her hand. 'I come here every day,' she explained, and added, 'I shall never need a psychiatrist.'

As they walked away, Suzette said, 'She's so right. Trees and animals keep us sane. I have often thought that if I had enough money, I would buy a place in the country, where I could relax and recover from the city.'

'Do you like the country, then?' asked Bill. 'Were you born there?'

Suzette shook her head. 'I was born in one of the most dreary Paris slums. As a small child, my mother used to take me to a little park near our house. It was the first glimpse of

beauty I had, and it left a lasting impression on me. I have always longed to have a garden with my own trees and flowers. To plant things. To find out what kind of flower comes out in springtime on the various plants. I can understand how peasants fall in love with their land, and would protect it with their life if need be.'

He stared in surprise at Suzette. He had expected that they would talk of Suzette's life in some of the capitals of the world, or of something so dear to his heart. On the spur of the moment, he made up his mind.

'I would so much like you to come to my place in New England. I am sure you would love it. I bought it years ago, and it has stood empty more often than it has been occupied. It was a big disappointment to me, but my wife hated the country.'

'Your wife?'

'I am a widower. My wife was killed in a motor accident.'

'I am so sorry,' said Suzette gently.

Bill, sighed. 'I don't know why I should tell you this,' he said, 'but it wasn't sad a bit. My wife was unfaithful the day after we were married. I found it out a year after my son was born. I found a letter from her lover in a pocket-book. I know I shouldn't have read it, but I just could not stop myself. She tried to lie her way out of it, and when she found she couldn't, she taunted me with being dull. I will never forget the look on her face. I had imagined that she was unsophisticated. My parents had always taught me that women were to be treasured, protected and respected.' Bill laughed bitterly.

'What happened after that?' asked Suzette. There was a long pause, as Bill looked back on his unhappy memory.

'Oh, we went on for years. After Tina was born I thought perhaps our two children would make some difference, but I was mistaken. Then I told myself that it was my duty to keep our home together because of the children. That I owed it to them to disguise what sort of woman their mother was. It is a terrible mistake to think that such a thing can ever be hidden. I think those kids must have known before they understood

what it was all about. Maybe she was careless about flaunting her lovers in front of them.'

'I am so very, very sorry,' Suzette said. Bill went on as though he had not heard her.

'Then two years ago it happened. She was killed while driving to Las Vegas. She was with a well-known gambler, and they were both dead drunk according to the autopsy. I did everything to hush it all up, for the sake of Tina and Jay. It wasn't only that she couldn't be trusted in any way whatsoever, but we had nothing in common. She always hated anything I liked. She always liked to destroy everything. She was never happy unless she was embroiled in some kind of drama. She would taunt me until I hit her. She lived her life only for excitement and for hurting other people. Sometimes I think she used to enjoy the quarrels and the reconciliations. She was utterly empty otherwise. She had no other interests except getting drunk and going to bed—with anyone. It didn't matter to her who it was, as long as it was someone new.'

'What about your parents?', asked Suzette.

'They hated her. My father just could not believe that a woman who had been so well brought up could behave like a tramp.'

They had reached the park gate. Bill said, 'Would you ever have time to visit Oaklands? We could make up a party. Bring that nice friend of yours. What's her name, Madame von Wagenstrate?'

'How refreshing to meet such an old-world type of man,' thought Suzette. 'He even thinks of providing me with a chaperone. How nice to find an attitude like this in America, with its new-world ideas.'

Suzette was yet to find out that America sometimes clung to the old as well as to the new.

She said goodbye to Bill at the stage door of the opera house. It had been arranged that they should go to the country after her season at the Met.

'And please try and save me a little of your time till then,' said Bill.

Suzette was soon swept up in rehearsals. She had to play the exacting role of Turandot for the next production, and was also singing her usual role. She knew this role already by heart, but had to perfect it and work with the rest of the cast as a team. Directly after rehearsals, she had to have fittings for her various costumes. At least she was spared the wigmaker's attentions, except for one white wig, for her naturally luxuriant hair lent itself admirably to the parts she had to play.

She always had a quick, light lunch with Madame von Wagenstrate. She was tired after rehearsals and the exhaustion that comes after intense excitement, and Madame understood only too well what Suzette was going through.

'Now you must go home and rest,' she would say over their coffee, and Suzette did not have to be persuaded.

One day, coming into her room, she was confronted by a huge vase filled with tuber-roses, freccias and lilies-of-the-valley. A card was attached, and she read, 'From W. Arkwright Brown'. The 'W. Arkwright' had been crossed through and 'Bill' written above it. There was a short message, 'To Melody Personified', and in the corner was engraved, 'President of Brown's Steel and Arkwright Industries, Inc.'

Suzette was touched. Bill, despite his stolid appearance, was a romantic. What an extraordinary quality to find in an American industrialist.

After her rest, she felt again in a state of high nervous excitement, mixed with dread, as she had been the night before. Now she was worried because she thought that yesterday's performance might have been just luck. What if today, after her rave notices, she gave a mediocre performance? She felt desperately alone. Why hadn't she someone who really belonged to her, to be giving their strength to her with affection and encouragement? If only her mother and Mademoiselle Herge could have been telling her not to be silly, or if only she had a husband to tell her that she was beautiful and, as one of the critics had said, that she had 'the voice of the century'.

She rang the bell and ordered coffee from the maid, who looked at her admiringly. It was obvious that she had read the

notices. She asked for Suzette's autograph when she brought the coffee, and Suzette smilingly gave it to her.

'Some of the other staff wondered if you would be kind enough, Ma'am, to sign for them too,' said the girl, 'but they are afraid to ask you.'

'Why?' asked Suzette. 'I am happy that anyone should want it.'

The maid thanked her, and closed the door after her quietly. 'She's a honey,' she thought to herself. 'She sure isn't spoiled by success.'

Suzette bathed and dressed. She wore a white evening gown of *peau de soie*, and a white stole lined with heavy emerald satin. She went to the manager's office to the safe where her jewels were kept, and selected emerald and diamond earrings, bracelet and necklace—antique pieces left to her by Etien.

She arrived at the opera house, only two blocks away, where her bodyguards of yesterday were on the look-out for her. It was just as well. She would never have been able to walk the few steps to the door, had they not been there.

There was a large crowd waiting for her, and suddenly the sight of her fans acted like a tonic. Why should she grieve at not having someone dear to her by her side, when all these people had taken her to their hearts? She felt immensely grateful to the nameless admirers and friends who had stood for an hour or two just to catch a glimpse of her. Her self-confidence came back. Yesterday she had been Lakmé, modest, timid, feminine. Today she was Turandot, cruel and arrogant. She held the audience on the edge of their seats with her singing. There was no doubt about it, her acting ability made many of them see *Turandot* as for the first time.

Nevertheless, she by no means overshadowed the other singers. Instead, she inspired in them some of her extraordinary enthusiasm. Each gave a superb performance, so that every artist felt that this was the greatest performance of his or her career.

When the curtain fell on the last act, the applause seemed to Suzette to be even louder than the night before. The audi-

ence called her back again and again, and as she bowed with the other performers the tenor grabbed her and kissed her on both cheeks.

Viedmont made her take several curtain calls by herself. 'You are', he said, 'our brightest star.'

Chapter Eleven

IT did not seem possible that so much could have happened in so short a time. Six months had passed, and Suzette's season at the Met. was over. She had given two or three concerts which had been packed to capacity, and now she was an established star.

She had hoped to go to Oaklands for Christmas, but her singing engagements had made that impossible. However, she managed to get a few days' holiday at the end of February. It was 1945, and still the war dragged on. The Germans were withdrawing from the Ardennes, and Warsaw had been captured by the Russians. Cracow had been taken. The Russians had moved into Silesia, and the Burma Road to China had been re-opened. But the war seemed remote to Suzette now that she was in the States.

Bill had told her how much he regretted not being in the armed services. He had been persuaded to stay at his job in the steel industry, for his technical knowledge was a valuable asset for the war effort.

Now she was at last on her way to Oaklands, and was travelling by train with Madame von Wagenstrat. They sat in opposite corners of the carriage as the train hurtled along. Suzette regarded her companion affectionately. She looked so different from the American women, and her clothes were unmistakably European in cut and finish.

'Where do you buy your clothes?' she asked.

'I have them made for me, my child,' answered Madame von Wagenstrate, peering through her lorgnette at Suzette. She let her book drop into her lap, and laughed. 'It is very extravagant of me. Here we are in a country which specializes in making good cheap clothes, and I have mine custom made by a little tailor in the Eighties.'

Then after a pause, she said, 'Tell me more about your young man.'

'Good heavens,' said Suzette. 'I hardly know him.' To her annoyance she started to blush.

'Suzette, my dear, you must forget your first unhappy experience. Perhaps I should not say "forget". You will never do that. But at least don't be afraid of living. You are young and beautiful, and you have great talent, but you cannot spend all your time working.'

They talked animatedly for the rest of the journey, and at last they arrived at Brunswick. Bill met them, looking years younger in his country clothes. He wore a yellow turtle-necked sweater and tweeds. It was bitterly cold and snowing as they got out of the heated train, and they hurried to the car where Bill, solicitous as ever, wrapped rugs around their knees. They drove quickly through the sparkling white countryside. Large bare branched trees grew thickly on either side of the road.

'You should see this part of the country in the autumn,' said Bill. 'It is a sight to make you hold your breath. The leaves are tawny red, and the trees seem almost on fire.'

'It is attractive now in its way,' said Suzette. 'It reminds me of all the fairy tales I heard as a child. You can imagine all sorts of other-world people—witches and gnomes—living here. There is something so clean about it, too. So untouched.'

They arrived at last at the gateway to the house. It was almost like an English country estate, even to the lodge on the left hand side. A tall, heavily-built Scandinavian came out to open the gates for them.

'This is Eric,' said Bill. 'His family have worked for us for two generations,' Suzette smiled warmly at him.

The drive to the house had tall, splendid old trees on either side of it, and Suzette could imagine the beauty of it all during the summer months. Now the trees stood sentinel-like in their winter bareness, in sharp contrast to the blanket of snow around them.

Now the house came into view. Suzette exclaimed with pleasure at the sight of it. It was built of stone in Greek classical style, with four graceful columns supporting the stone porch. With its ample proportions it could have been a dignified country mansion in Europe—the only difference being the nearby swimming pool, covered just then with ice.

Bill looked at Suzette's enraptured face. He took her hand and squeezed it. 'I don't have to ask if you like it.'

She turned to him. 'I didn't know such beautiful houses still existed, except perhaps in books and films.'

They went up the steps and through the door to the vast hall beyond. On either side of the hallway Suzette could see large rooms of stately proportions, filled with antique furniture. Above them wound a wide staircase of great grandeur. It was like a palace.

Bill noticed her looking hard at a small, elegant table. 'I see you are interested in good furniture,' he said. 'The twin of this table is in the Louvre.' Then he looked embarrassed. 'That sure sounds boastful,' he said, 'but my mother and father went all over Europe trying to bring back a bit of your old world. It is something that money alone won't buy. It has to be bred into you.'

Madame nodded approvingly.

An English housekeeper then showed them to their rooms. Suzette again exclaimed at the sight of the luxurious, elegantly furnished room.

The housekeeper said shyly, 'Mademoiselle Breval, I would like to say how much we enjoyed your concert in Boston the other day. We saw it on television, and we are so thrilled that you have come to stay at Oaklands. Is it true that you once lived in England?'

'Yes,' said Suzette. 'I am very fond of your country.'

'We left England just before the war,' the woman went on. 'We have often wondered if we ought to have tried to get back, even though the war was on. It doesn't seem quite right for us to be here somehow.'

Suzette understood what she was trying to say. She answered gently, 'If you were back there, simply facing the danger, you would not be helping at all. You may even be able to do more for your country here in the States by reminding people of the struggle going on across the sea.'

Later the housekeeper talked enthusiastically about Suzette to her husband, who worked as the butler. 'She's a really gracious lady, that's what Mum would have called her.' Mrs Robinson's mother had been in service in what the Robinsons called 'the good old days'. It was strange how scornful they were of the present day, even though conditions had so much improved for them. It amused their American employer and his friends very much, and often Bill would try to make them talk about it. Their relationship was very much more informal than it would have been in England.

Suzette had already discovered that only extremely wealthy people in America had servants at all. Domestic workers earned a fortune compared to those in Europe.

In her room, Suzette changed into a hand-knitted dark green woollen dress and jacket, with perfectly matched shoes and handbag of the same colour. Her black hair was smoothly plaited and wound on her head like a coronet. She wore earrings and a necklace of large, lustrous pearls.

Looking at her, no one would have believed that she had started life in a Paris slum. She walked downstairs quietly to look for the others, taking her time as she went down the wide staircase to look at the portraits which hung in heavy gilt frames.

She paused before a painting of a woman dressed in a dark red velvet evening gown. Wide grey eyes regarded her serenely. 'That must be Bill's mother,' she thought.

She walked into a large sitting room where she could hear laughing and talking. The room was furnished with antiques

and several comfortable, softly upholstered chairs—a happy mixture of old and new. There were quite a number of people there, and they had all been asked to luncheon to meet the now famous prima donna.

They were all used to meeting celebrities, but they sensed an indefinable aura of brilliance and glamour around Suzette. They moved round her like planets in orbit around a star, as though they could not escape from her magnetism. They were genuine and friendly, and Suzette felt a warm sympathy towards them. 'What kind people they are,' she thought to herself, 'and how easy it is to get along with them. They have such a friendly informality.'

They were all drinking Manhattans and Martinis, but Bill passed Suzette a glass of white wine, for he knew she hated strong drinks. His hand lingered on hers as he passed the glass to her, and she did not snatch away her hand as she might have done with someone else.

Suddenly she saw him stiffen as he caught sight of the young woman who had just come into the room, and who was now regarding them with cold, hostile, grey eyes. Slowly she walked towards them with insolent grace. She wore a vivid red flannel dress with gilt buttons, a mink coat, and very high heeled shoes of crocodile leather. The fingers clutching the red leather handbag were scarlet tipped, to match the poppy mouth. The lips were a little smudged. Her hair was brown and shoulder length.

'Hello, Tina. What a nice surprise,' said Bill evenly.

'Is it?' the young girl answered. She could not have been more than fifteen, but there was a repellent look of sophistication about her.

Bill started to introduce them. 'Suzette, I want you to meet . . .' But Tina turned her back on them both, and sauntered off. She walked over to the noisiest corner of the room, threw the priceless coat on the floor, and lit a cigarette.

Suzette was angry at this rudeness. She had never met anyone who behaved in such an ill-mannered way, and if she had not been so fond of Bill, she would have left instantly.

The people who were nearest to them, and who had seen the incident, gathered around Suzette. They asked her about Europe and the war, but she was conscious that her conversation must sound unnatural. One part of her mind was still busy with Tina's insulting behaviour.

Bill stood silently at her side, looking uncomfortable and uneasy. Suzette was telling them of the time her ship had been attacked in convoy. Her audience listened attentively. The thought that this talented, lovely girl might have been killed so impersonally, the beautiful voice destroyed so wantonly, clearly brought home to them the futile stupidity of war.

Robinson, looking like a character-actor playing an English butler, announced lunch in a hollow, rather exaggerated English accent.

They walked across the hall to the dining room, Bill and Suzette leading the way. Bill sat at the head of the table, with Suzette on his right, and on his other side sat a woman with very blonde hair, a small nose and doll-like mouth. She spoke with a babyish Southern drawl. 'Tina sure is like her mother. She's got the same kind of temperament too. Just the same old sparkle and full of fun. I guess she'll be a handful with the boys.'

Bill pointedly ignored this tactless remark, and turned to talk to Suzette. But Gloria could not be suppressed so easily.

'I'm only a woman,' she said to Suzette. 'Not one of these big-career girls. All I want to know is what you French gals have which we haven't. Here's Bill now, he hasn't dated a girl in years, at least not seriously. We've been dancing a couple of times, haven't we, Bill? But he's so preoccupied being a father, and it takes quite a woman to make him forget that.'

She paused and looked at Suzette, obviously waiting for an answer. There was a hush in the conversation, then Tina's voice said, 'Gloria, be your age. Don't be so immature, you know how things are.'

Suzette flushed at the implication. It angered her, and she felt it both unprovoked and unjust. She turned to Gloria, smiling sweetly. 'Do you really want to know? It is the attitude of

mind of French women. We are taught from the earliest age that we should be interesting—self-centred people are rarely so. We always try hard not to be boring and rude. That is why the French woman, who often has not half the looks of women from other countries, has such a reputation for charm.'

The man at her side laughed uproariously. 'Touché!' he said. 'Now, ladies, don't scratch. Let's talk about something else.'

Bill now recovered his good humour, and his eyes were full of admiration for her. So Suzette was well able to defend herself! She could give back as good as she got.

Madame von Wagenstrate was talking in German to her neighbour, who had originally come from her country. Now he was a delicatessen king, super-patriotic to his adopted country. He had arrived in New York nearly half a century ago, with just a few marks in his pocket, and had worked like a beaver with characteristic German energy. Steadily and thriftily he had built up a huge fortune. He and Madame spoke candidly to one another in the anonymity of their own language.

'There is one bad thing in this country,' said Gottwahler, 'and that is the bringing up of some of the children. They have no discipline. Their parents try to give them too much, too soon. Look at Tina, for instance. She has had everything she ever wanted, and considers it her right and due. Mademoiselle Breval is so right when she says women must be interesting. Tina is doomed to unhappy marriages and an unsatisfactory life. Look at her now.'

Tina was sitting in the hostess's place at the far end of the table, pouting and looking bored. A cigarette dangled from her fingers, and she blew the smoke uncaringly in the face of the man next to her, who was still finishing his dessert. He coughed, but she did not apologize.

'What bad manners,' said Madame. 'You would think that her father would reprove her. It is a reflection on him.'

'He doesn't think so,' said Gottwahler. 'He feels his duty begins and ends with providing a fifteen-year-old girl with a

mink coat and a sports car. She must have unlimited pocket money to impress her friends at High School.'

Meanwhile, Tina was looking up the table at Suzette. Her father had told her rather guardedly that he had met a most amazing woman whom she would like. Tina had instantly decided that her father was 'hooked', and she was determined to break up the match—if match it was. She was as mature in matters of sex as a woman of thirty would have been in Europe.

'She hasn't got her hands on his money yet,' she thought. 'Let Dad buy her a few jewels. He's only a man after all, and if he wants to go to bed with her—so what?'

But, seeing Suzette for the first time, she had had a nasty shock. She had imagined some blousy, sexy, common-looking French woman, but Suzette looked aristocratic, well-bred and dignified. It would be difficult to come to grips with someone who made her feel inferior and cheap.

Now her thoughts were wandering from Suzette to school. A new student had just arrived, who had caused half the feminine population at Marding House High to squeal in ecstasy. His name was Pelham, abbreviated to 'Pel', and his father was wealthy, though how he had made his money no-one seemed to know.

On days when parents were invited to the school, Pel's father—a small, harrassed, wizened-looking man—would arrive in a long black Cadillac. He had a strong accent, possibly Italian or Spanish, and Pel had once heard someone say 'Who's the Mocky?' He had jutted out his lip, punched the young man on his nose, then glared around the circle of scared faces and, with his fist still poised in the air, said, 'Who wants to know?'

He was angry, not because his father had been slighted, but because it was a reflection on himself. He hated his father for his shrewd intellect, his sharp intelligence. He was his mother's son—large, indolent, Southern. Pel's mother had never hidden the disgust she felt for her rich, clever little husband. He was the breadwinner in the family, but the interloper, and treated as a poor relation in his own house. He would have left her

long ago, but she had found out that he had come into the country illegally, and whenever divorce was mentioned she threatened to denounce him.

Coming from this home background, Pel was arrogant, vicious and always searching for distraction. His latest enthusiasm was marijuana, and he had introduced it to Marding House. The faculty wondered why their students had become even more unmanageable, but they put it down to the unsettling personality of the new boy. Every girl was anxious to be dated by him, but he never took a girl out more than once unless she would give way to his sexual advances.

He had what he called his 'harem', until he crossed swords with Tina. He had met his match at last, and it was he who now became the slave, and she the master.

Tina was now thinking that she had made a mistake to come home by herself. She should have brought Pel—he could always raise hell. She was brought out of her daydream by someone asking her a question.

'What do you think of Verdi? On the spur of the moment she said, 'I've never been there.' There was a shocked silence. Someone near to her laughed. Tina did not like being laughed at, and she left the table without a word and stalked up to her room.

Now that Tina had gone, the party became more relaxed and animated. 'It is surprising,' thought Suzette, 'that one teenage girl can create such hostility around her.' She looked at Bill with pity mixed with amazement. How could he tolerate this child of his? Or did he not see her for what she was?

The lunch was over, and they moved back to the sitting room. Their guests left, then Madame von Wagenstrate went to her room to rest, leaving Bill and Suzette alone.

They sat on the sofa together. He looked at the thick, piled jet-black hair, and the serene brow; the large eyes with their long dark lashes. She looked back at him, not saying a word.

'Suzette,' he said, 'you know I love you.'

She laid a finger on his lips before he could say more. The perfume from her hand smelled like flowers in the rain—

fresh, enticing. He kissed the inside of her palm. 'Do you think you could ever grow to love me? Would you . . .'

'Dear Bill, I really can't answer these questions. There is Tina. And your son—what about him?'

Bill looked troubled. 'I wanted the meeting with Tina to be so different. But even if it takes time to win her round, Jay will be on our side. Jay will fall for you in a big way.'

'Please, my dear, don't expect me to give you an answer today, or for some days,' said Suzette. 'I have to think about it.'

Why had Bill said it would take time to win Tina round, she thought. Surely it was she herself who needed persuading, not a mere child?

She had to confess to herself that Bill had been a great deal in her thoughts just lately, and that she was often crushingly lonely, in spite of her success. But she knew that first she must lose her fear of loving. Both her serious love affairs had been ill-fated. The more she heard of Bill, the more she realized that he was highly eligible. She had to admit, too, that he appeared to be deeply in love with her. She felt a fondness for him, and a liking for what he stood for, which was different from anything she had felt before.

There had been passion and desire in her feelings for Etien and Serge, whereas there was affection for Bill. They sat silently, still looking at one another: Bill worshipfully, Suzette remote in her thoughts.

He spoke at last. 'Is there any hope at all for me?' he asked humbly. In a way, his gentleness outraged her—it was hard to believe that this man was the President of a huge combine of companies.

'It is fantastic,' she thought. 'Here is a man who is the controlling force in a tough business enterprise, but he is incapable of commanding respect in his own family.' It did not make sense. Would it be possible to build a happy life on such a cracked foundation?

Bill broke into her thoughts again. 'I am so lucky to have met you,' he said. 'Even if you refuse me, I will never love anyone else.'

Suzette was touched at his words. They sounded old-fashioned, unsophisticated, but desperately sincere. He leaned towards her, took her in his arms, and kissed her deeply, breathlessly. Suzette was taken by surprise, but she returned his kiss. 'You are bewildering me,' she said.

She walked across the room, and looked out of the window at the snowy scene outside. He came behind her, and put his arm around her waist.

'Would you like this for your home, Suzette? Would you be happy here?'

'It would be wonderful. But what about my career? I will always have to sing, as long as I have my voice.'

'I understand that,' said Bill, 'but it makes no difference. I could often come with you on your tours, for most of my work is simply making decisions and that can be done over the telephone.'

Suzette suddenly felt tempted to say 'yes' there and then, but at that moment the door burst open, and Tina strode, bare-footed, into the room. Her only garment was a bathrobe of excellent quality but filthy—it had a smear of egg on one lapel. At the sight of her, the magic mood was broken.

'I want Eric to drive me to Marding House in half an hour,' she said to her father. Without waiting for a reply, and without addressing Suzette, she stalked out again. In the doorway, she bumped into Robinson, and pushed him aside without an apology. He flushed angrily, and Suzette felt sorry for him.

'Where would you like tea served, sir?' he asked. Suzette turned her head away, for she had an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh, although it was all so sad.

Chapter Twelve

AFTER her visit to Oaklands, Bill wrote to Suzette nearly every day, and saw her at least once a week, sometimes flying across the States to do so.

Suzette was always busy. Every time she moved outside her hotel suite, wherever it happened to be, it was public appearance for her. Always around her were the whispering voices—'There she goes'—'Isn't she lovely?'—'Have you heard her sing?'

She loved her public wholeheartedly. She signed autographs untiringly, and was always polite to the Press. She gave herself freely to the people, and they gave her back not only admiration for her work, but something much more.

On her return season at the Met. she was, to her delight, asked to sing *Madame Butterfly*. With her usual energy for work, she plunged into rehearsals.

On the opening night, the opera house was full to capacity. Suzette had reached the peak of fame, where her performances were the basis of a thriving black market in theatre tickets. The whole of the musical world in the metropolis clamoured and queued to see her.

In her dressing room she was putting the finishing touches to her make-up. As usual, before a performance of such importance, she felt almost stiff with fright. But at the last moment,

as she waited for her entrance in the wings, she felt a great surge of courage. There was no going back.

Halfway through the performance she suddenly saw the role as strikingly similar to her own life story. This thought so upset her, that for one terrible moment she felt she could not go on. But her strict training helped her, and somehow she managed it. In the last act real tears flowed down her cheeks, and the emotion she felt was genuine.

Never had she received such tumultuous applause. All who had seen and heard her were equally moved—many of the women, and even some of the men, were dabbing their eyes.

Suzette was ashamed of allowing her feelings to overcome her. When Viedmont came forward to congratulate her, she said brokenly, 'I will never sing *Butterfly* again.'

'Oh yes, you will,' he said, 'There is no other *Butterfly* except yourself.'

In the crowd which gathered around her, Suzette was introduced to a fat, stocky man with thick-framed glasses. She did not notice him particularly, but the next morning at rehearsals she saw him once again with Viedmont.

'Mr Latter wants to take us to lunch,' he said. Aside he whispered to her, 'American Film Corporation.'

Then she understood. Latter was the well-known President of a powerful film empire. He had started in the early days when films were a series of improvisations on the set, and were made on practically no money at all. Stars were discovered in stores or restaurants, or in garages, and making films was fun though a little precarious.

Latter had made good. He was wily, adaptable, and unhampered by principles. If it had been necessary to dispose of his grandfather to get what he wanted, he would have unhesitatingly thrown the old man to the lions. He had the gift for finding people of talent, both stars and technicians. What Suzette did not know about him was that for the last six months it had been his dream to film *Madame Butterfly*, and even he had not been able to find a star who sang well and looked beautiful too.

Behind his owl-like spectacles, Latter watched Suzette closely. He saw her, not as a person, but on a movie screen, her face magnified to gigantic proportions. Yes, she would do. In fact, she would be better than that, she might even be sensational.

'She is star quality, even if she could not sing a note,' he thought. 'Her face is unusual, and she looks convincingly oriental, even without make-up.'

They took her to lunch at Sardi's, where Latter soon got down to business.

'Have you ever been in a movie?' he asked Suzette.

'Never.'

'Would you consider it for a hundred thousand dollars?'

'The man must be mad,' thought Suzette, and said jokingly, 'Is that all you can offer?'

'A hundred and fifty thousand.'

'Tell me what you want me to do for all that money.'

'Butterfly,' said Latter. 'I saw you yesterday. Unless you play the part, I won't film the story.'

'Not Butterfly,' said Suzette. 'I never want to play it again.'

Viedmont was astonished. He had regarded Suzette as the least temperamental of all his singers, and there she was repeating what he had regarded as yesterday's whim.

'Why not Butterfly?' said Latter. 'You mean you would accept if I wanted you to play Mimì?'

'Yes.'

Latter pushed his glasses up over his forehead, took a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed his eyes. 'My poor old mother will be broken hearted. Butterfly is her favourite piece of music, and when I was a poor young kid on the East Side I used to hear her hum it. When talkies came in, I used to say to her, "Some day, Mom, I'm going to film your favourite opera".'

'He may be hard-faced, but he has some finer feelings,' thought Suzette.

'I would like to have pleased her before she died,' Latter said. He replaced his glasses on the bridge of his nose. 'Well, never mind, you have your reasons, I suppose.'

Suzette, who had been talking animatedly, now ate silently. She thought of Latter's intense desire to please his mother, and she knew only too well how hard it would be to find a convincing Madame Butterfly. She thought of the few singers she knew magnified in close-up in the pitiless eye of the camera.

Viedmont tried again. 'Suzette, why don't you want to sing Butterfly? Yesterday's performance was superb. Tell us your reasons, then perhaps we can work something out.'

She was flustered at being asked point-blank something which she could not answer without telling her whole story.

'It is so sad . . .' she faltered.

'But most operas are sad,' said Viedmont, 'and many have unhappy endings.'

Latter shook his head sorrowfully. 'Mademoiselle Breval is too kind-hearted, but she is depriving the world of a great deal of pleasure. Of course, it may be that Butterfly is a Japanese heroine—not all of us want to play the enemy. But I, myself, am a great believer in good race relations. You never know whether you may be helping some Nesei family by showing the Japanese in a sympathetic light. Gee, some of those people have had a tough time during this war.'

'I will take the part,' she said.

Some weeks later, she met Latter's mother on the film set. She was a bouncing, youthful personality, full of life.

Suzette was curious to talk to her. 'Do you live in California, Mrs Latter?' she asked.

'Yes, when I am at home. But I travel all the time. I just love sight-seeing. I just came to see Harry and Marian. Marian is my daughter. She is a script writer, and wrote the script for this film of yours.'

Suzette expressed surprise. She had understood that David Belasco had written the film story of Madame Butterfly. But there was more to come.

'I hope this new venture of Harry's will work out all right. I wanted him to do something Japanese, but I never thought he would do *Madame Butterfly*.'

'But don't you like *Madame Butterfly*, Mrs Latter?'

'Oh, yes, it's all right, but it's not my taste, and I suppose there are plenty of others like me. After all, Harry is in the entertainment business, and he didn't make his money with the classics.'

Suzette looked across the set at the perfidious Harry. He was in earnest conversation with two other men. Like him, they wore glasses. They could have been brothers. She wondered why he always gave the impression of plotting some kind of revolution or crime. His most innocent conversation was apt to look like an intrigue when seen from a distance.

After shooting that day, Suzette cornered him. She was not particularly angry, but was interested in what his reaction would be when she challenged the story about his mother.

'Mom like *Madame Butterfly*? Hell, no,' he said, 'she likes jazz or *The Merry Widow*.'

'Then why did you tell me that story in Sardi's?'

Latter's face was expressionless. Suddenly he remembered. 'Why, I was only kidding, honey. You didn't really believe me, did you? That's too bad.'

'It is too bad,' she said. 'It's too bad that you are the wrong side of the camera. Your talents are wasted.'

Latter patted her shoulder in a fatherly way. 'I've got the reputation in this business of being the straightest man in Hollywood. I wouldn't cheat anyone, let alone you. Why, I've *made* you. I've created you.'

'Hardly that,' she said. 'After all, the Met. is not exactly unknown.'

'That doesn't count,' said Latter. 'Until you've been to Hollywood, you're a nobody. Don't you worry, my dear. Leave it all to me. Honest Harry, that's what they call me!'

One of the men with glasses was hovering a few yards from him.

'Just coming, Gultz,' Latter said. He patted Suzette's arm again and walked off, his arm round his friend's shoulder. They were whispering together as they walked along. Suzette shrugged. She couldn't really complain, for she would be getting a vast sum of money and even greater fame.

Back in her dressing room, she was removing her make-up when the telephone rang. It was Bill.

'I've just come in, darling, and I'm at the airport. Will you have dinner with me tonight?'

'Yes,' she answered, 'but I must be in bed early.'

'I won't keep you out late,' he promised.

She put down the phone, then felt sorry she had not sounded more enthusiastic. Bill had probably flown several hundred miles just to catch a glimpse of her, and here she was taking him for granted as though he lived in the next street.

So she was especially nice to him when they met. She felt real pleasure at seeing him—the sheer rapture he felt when he saw her was infectious, and it was impossible to remain unmoved.

There was something else to feel pleased about, for it was said that the end of the war was near. It was reported that Hitler was dead, and that the German command had collapsed. 'In a few days there will be an armistice,' said Bill. 'I have been in Washington in conference with the State Department, and there is no doubt about it.'

Then, after a pause, he said again, 'I want you to marry me. What is holding you back?'

'I think we could be happy,' Suzette said guardedly.

'Then why hesitate?'

'I cannot settle down, Bill. I would always be on the move. Not only in the States, but to Europe, to Australia.'

'But we have talked about that already. I could always fix it so we can be together.'

Suzette paused, and then went on, 'You have children, Bill. That can create all sorts of difficulties.'

'They will grow to like you.'

'They will try to turn you against me,' she answered. 'That is the reason why I have not said "yes" to you. I couldn't bear it if I had to fight with them for your affection.'

'I love the children,' he said, 'and it is my duty to make them happy. But a man's duty to his wife comes first.'

'No matter what?'

'No matter what. If that is the only thing that stops you from marrying me, you can forget it.'

'All right then, Bill. I hope you will never regret it.'

Bill kissed her warmly in front of the whole restaurant. He was radiant. Suzette, now that she had committed herself, had a bitter-sweet sensation of mixed emotions. She had turned her back on Serge and Ilya.

'May we announce it?' asked Bill. 'I don't want you to change your mind.'

Suzette nodded. 'Whenever you wish, my dear.'

In spite of the excitement, Bill took her back to the hotel early. He kissed her gently at the door of her room, then turned away, and she watched his broad back affectionately as he walked down the corridor. Surely there would be safety and security in loving such a man?

She was just about to get into bed, when there was a knock at the door. Could it be Bill again? She called through the door, 'Who is it?'

A woman's voice answered in French, 'Mademoiselle Breval, you don't know me, but please let me in. It is important. I have news for you from abroad.'

Suzette opened the door, and saw a small, foreign-looking woman. She asked her in, and said quickly, 'What is it? What have you to tell me?'

'Ilya is well. Serge is in Czechoslovakia, and you must not worry about anything.'

'Thank you for telling me that, but who sent you with this message. And who are you? Are you a relation of Serge's?'

'I am Czech,' said the woman guardedly. She looked around the room fearfully, as if she suspected someone was listening. 'Comrade Ilytsin asked me to see you,' she whispered. 'Now I must go.'

'But where do you live?' asked Suzette desperately. 'How can I get in touch with you again?'

The woman only answered, 'I am leaving tomorrow. Please do not try to see me again.' She hurried off down the corridor.

Alone again, Suzette felt confused and worried. Just as she had made the decision to marry Bill, she had had the unsettling experience of hearing from Serge for the first time.

'I should tell Bill the whole story,' she thought miserably. 'But I can never tell him. It is all so complicated, so embarrassing, so unhappy.'

Now she wished that she had not promised to marry Bill. She longed for Serge and Ilya. Had it been possible, there and then, to leave everything and go to them, she would have done so. But it was a physical impossibility, and she would not even know how to set about it. She and Serge were as far apart as if they had been on different planets.

She did not sleep very well that night. She kept trying to remember how the little woman had looked, so that she could try to find her again and question her.

The next morning she woke late and had breakfast in her room. She telephoned the studio to leave a message that she would be delayed for half an hour.

As she drove to the studio, she saw a small, undistinguished-looking woman with glasses hurrying along the sidewalk. She parked the car hurriedly and chased after her.

'Excuse me, please may I speak to you?' she cried in French.

The woman started. 'What do you want?' she said with an American accent.

'I'm so sorry,' said Suzette. 'I have made a mistake, I thought you were a friend.'

She walked back to the car as if in a daze, and drove off mechanically, her heart heavy, feeling that she would be unable to work. She wanted to go away, to sit under the trees in the park and be alone with her thoughts.

The make-up man at the studio was quite surprised at her haggard appearance.

'Did you have a late night?' he said. 'You have circles under your eyes, and for the first time I have really had to work hard on you.'

'I was in bed early,' said Suzette, 'but I couldn't sleep.'

'Why didn't you take a sleeping pill?' he asked kindly.

'I never take sleeping pills. If I can't sleep, I just hope that the next night I may be luckier.'

'I only wish the others were the same. I often wonder whether some of them are not suffering from the permanent effects of being half-asleep.'

Once at work, Suzette's preoccupation with Serge and Ilya took second place. Then, later in the afternoon, when the day's shooting was nearly over, an assistant asked her to go and speak to the publicity people. 'They are waiting for you in Mr Latter's suite,' he said. 'It must be something big, Mademoiselle Breval, they are all there.'

Suzette remembered, suddenly and guiltily, that this was the day on which her engagement would be announced.

Latter's office looked like one of his own sets. She waded across the carpet to where he sat behind a nine-foot desk. Around him, on white leather chairs, sat the young men of the publicity department, suede-shoed, slightly arty. Two women were there; one very feminine, fluffy as a kitten, with a preposterous hat which seemed to be made of candyfloss; the other, very masculine, with cropped hair and serviceable brogues. She spoke in a surprisingly high-pitched voice, rather like a little girl, very out of character with her appearance.

Everyone was talking at once. There were cocktails and canapes, and obviously Latter was making this quite a festive occasion. Suzette saw Bill walking towards her, but before he could reach her, Latter stood up. He raised his hand, and there was instant silence. He looked around the room dramatically.

'You know we are all one happy family here at A.F.C. I've got some happy news for you all. This little girl here,' he pointed to Suzette, 'has gone and surprised us. She has fallen in love.'

Suzette groaned inwardly.

'She's going to get married, just like a fairytale princess.' Latter got carried away by his own performance. 'And just like the fairytale princess, she is going to marry her Prince Charming.' He pointed to the embarrassed Bill. 'Gee, if I were twenty years younger, I'd be the lucky man.'

It was his standard phrase when any of his staff got married. Dora Wiseberg surreptitiously kicked Lenny Freeman on the shin and winked. 'I've heard that one before,' she hissed.

Latter went on and on, thoroughly enjoying himself.

'Come on, give,' whispered another of the men. 'Who's the lucky guy?'

Finally Latter, seeing that his audience was wearying, said, 'And now the future bridegroom. He needs no introduction. Brown's Steel and Arkwright Industries Incorporated. Come on, Steely, give us a few words.'

Suzette laughed. She could not help it. She imagined herself married to the whole company, and could see her visiting card: Mrs Brown's Steel and Arkwright Industries Inc.

To her astonishment, Bill gave an easy, breezy little speech without embarrassment. He was used to addressing executive meetings, and regarded public speaking as part of his job. Suzette felt pleasantly surprised, and quite proud of him.

Then, to her confusion, Latter said, 'Now let's hear from the bride-to-be.'

Suzette felt every eye on her. They expected her to say something. They were waiting expectantly for her to give what was not there.

'This is a great day for me,' she said. 'Now, as well as my art. I shall have a husband—someone to treasure, and someone who will treasure me. I am fortunate, for my future husband is good through and through.'

She looked at Bill, and her glance was almost loving—enough to fool even Latter, who knew practically all there was to know about acting. Bill came to her side, and in full view of the others, tilted up her head and kissed her.

There was a flash as someone took a picture, and then they gathered around her. Latter had produced champagne, and the popping of corks added to the general gaiety.

'When will the picture be finished?' asked Candyfloss.

'I'd say this week,' said Latter.

'So it's all right to release the news straight away?'

'You don't feel like keeping the news back a few months, do you, honey?' Latter turned to Suzette.

She had no idea what he was talking about. Bill came and put his arm around her. 'Even if Suzette would consent to a postponement of the announcement,' he said, 'I would not. Publicity is publicity but, thank God, we don't have to time our private lives to give the maximum news value to your picture.'

Unabashed, Latter mumbled, 'It was only a suggestion.'

Suzette was now surrounded by people asking one question after another. She couldn't answer many of them, for she and Bill had hardly discussed their plans.

'Where will you live?' someone asked.

'We shall travel a great deal. But when we are at home, it will be Oaklands.' Bill smiled at her. It pleased him to hear her call Oaklands 'home'. He knew every tree, every single inch of the property, but he had never been able to share the joy of possessing it before.

Suzette was afraid that she was not giving anything like as much information as she should. Apart from the announcement, she did not see the purpose of having the whole publicity department to deal with the news. She underestimated Hollywood.

After the party she read that she and Bill were going to Tokyo for their honeymoon. In another paper, she read that it was Paris. In another, Hawaii. She shook her head in astonishment and passed the papers over to Bill. He laughed loud and long, and said, 'Here's something which should interest you. You are going to wear a gold lamé dress designed by Lanvin. You will have a train eight yards long, which will be held by six children. They will all be members of the nobility, who are related to you.'

Suzette giggled. 'Does it mention that we shall be married from our town house in the rue du Chapeau Rouge?' She had never hidden her humble origin from him.

He took the newspaper from her hand and kissed her, long and fervently. Whenever he kissed her, some of her fears went away. It would be all right.

Chapter Thirteen

THE wedding was over. Bill and Suzette had given way to Latter, and made it a real Hollywood affair. As Bill said, 'After all, it doesn't matter where we are married, so long as we are married. If it keeps that guy happy, it doesn't make all that difference to us.'

They had sent invitations and air tickets to both Jay and Tina. 'I am so looking forward to meeting Jay,' said Suzette. She tried not to let Bill see her dislike for Tina.

'You'll like Jay,' said Bill. 'He's very handsome.'

She was disappointed, but did not say so. Was that all he could mention in Jay's favour? Perhaps it was important to Bill that his son was good-looking, but she would have preferred him to say that Jay was a good student, or was considerate, or that he was a perfect fool at school but had a sweet nature.

Many great and famous people had come to the wedding, and the whole day was brilliantly successful. Viedmont and Townsend had flown down from New York, as well as several of Suzette's friends from the Met., and of course Madamc von Wagenstrate.

The reception had been held at Latter's house—it was a show-place, an ideal setting for such a glamorous occasion.

Suzette, serene and beautiful in a simple white gown from Balmain, whispered to Bill, 'Is Jay here?'

'I've been looking,' he said. 'I haven't seen him, and I haven't seen Tina either.'

'You did tell Jay that we were going to be married?' she asked anxiously. 'The invitation wasn't the first thing he knew about it, was it?'

'Of course not,' said Bill. 'He probably didn't bother to open his mail—you know what these young people are like.'

Suzette didn't. It was inconceivable that anyone should not open a letter addressed to them. Although she herself had a heavy fan mail, she read every one of her letters.

Just then, someone came to ask them where they were spending their honeymoon.

'We must be mad,' said Bill. 'We never discussed it. Where shall we go, darling, it's up to you.'

Suzette closed her eyes and concentrated. 'Is it really my choice?' she asked.

'Anywhere you say.'

'Then let's go to Oaklands.'

Bill's arms went around her waist and he lifted her off her feet. He whirled round with her, and kissed her. Her hair smelt warm and perfumed. 'I love you,' he said.

Late in the afternoon they left the party and started on their journey to Oaklands. At first they had wanted to drive there across the States, but Latter advised them to go by plane. 'It's such a long way to drive,' he said. 'I'll have someone call the airport.'

His secretary arranged it all with quick efficiency. 'Your tickets will be waiting for you at the airport,' she said. 'I hope you have a very good trip.'

At last they arrived. The Robinsons greeted Suzette with respect and affection, and presented her with a bouquet of white roses.

'I am so glad you are now Mrs Brown, Ma'am,' said Mrs Robinson. Suzette took one of the beautiful roses out of the bouquet and gave it to her. 'I'll press it in a book and keep it,' she said, 'I shall always treasure it, Ma'am.' She seized Suzette's

hand and kissed it, then rushed back into the house in an agony of embarrassment.

Bill watched proudly. 'I've never seen Mrs Robinson behave like that,' he said, 'Everyone loves you, and I am so happy that you are mine.'

As Suzette ran up the stairs, she thought to herself, 'Now we will find two letters waiting for us from Jay and Tina.' But there was nothing from either of them, although there was a huge pile of letters and telegrams. It took some time to read them all, and when the last one had been opened, Bill sighed sadly. Suzette put her hand on his.

'They could at least have written something,' he said.

Suzette would have liked to make some excuse for them to save Bill's feelings, but she could think of nothing.

But now they tried not to think of their disappointment, and determined to enjoy their stay at the lovely house. They discovered a new joy in nature, and used to wander the woods like a couple of children, suddenly noticing how fresh the air smelt and how sweetly the birds sang. The very trees seemed to shield them both from the ugliness of the world outside.

Gradually Suzette lost her inhibitions about loving someone else, for it was impossible not to become fond of Bill. And as they made love, the physical side of their relationship drew them together. Suzette enjoyed sex, unlike Bill's first wife, who had been frigid despite all her lovers. As their joy in each other grew, she could almost imagine that Bill was the first man she had ever loved and that she had never been married before. Serge and Ilya seemed like something out of a dream.

One day, when they had spent ten idyllic days at Oaklands, they had been for a walk in the woods and arrived back, feeling hungry and happy, for their lunch. As they came in, Suzette had an icy sensation of disaster. An expensive suitcase lay open in the hall, with some of its contents strewn on the floor. A pair of muddy shoes had been kicked off and lay nearby, and an open box of face powder had spilled onto the carpet.

They both knew that only one person could have made such chaos, but of Tina there was no sign.

Suzette went to her room to wash before lunch, and while she was in the bathroom, she heard the door burst open.

'Is that you, darling?' she called, although she knew that Bill, with his old-fashioned courtesy, always knocked before coming in. But, coming back into the bedroom, she found Tina standing there, dressed in the same filthy housecoat that Suzette remembered from their previous unhappy encounter.

She was instantly conscious of a repellent smell in the room—a combination of body odour and something else, acrid and reminiscent of cheap tobacco. Yet it was not tobacco. Tina's eyes were unnaturally bright.

'So you landed my father?' she sneered.

In spite of her revulsion, Suzette said, 'Tina, I want us to be friends. I will try and make you happy because I love your father.'

'You love his bank account.'

Suzette took a step forward, strongly tempted to slap the dissolute young face. At this, Tina began to scream out a stream of obscenities. Suzette could hardly believe what she heard. As a child living in one of the toughest neighbourhoods of Paris she had heard swearing, but never anything like this.

Tina stopped at last for breath.

'I hope that Jay will be nice enough to make up for you,' said Suzette fervently. She determined there and then to do all she could to win Jay's affections, so as to give Bill some semblance of family life.

Tina laughed crazily. 'What a hope you've got,' she said. 'I've seen Jay already and told him that Father has married a French tart. Why don't you go back to the streets where you belong?' Her voice had risen hysterically.

'Get out!' Suzette shouted.

Tina ran from the room, laughing in a way that was frightening to hear.

Suzette looked at herself in the mirror. There were two

spots of angry colour on her cheeks, and her eyes were hard and glittering. She realized that if Tina stayed with her and Bill, their marriage would never last.

'I couldn't imagine anything so vile as this girl. If this is an example of American adolescence, no wonder American men have married so many foreign women.' Yet there were American women and children too who would be a credit to any nation. Why were Bill's children so horrible?

Suzette went downstairs, reluctant to see Bill, for it was impossible not to blame him a little for Tina's behaviour.

But Bill had come out of the dining room, and stood at the foot of the stairs waiting for her.

'You've been a long time, my dearest,' he said. 'What have you been doing?'

'I've been talking to Tina,' said Suzette drily. 'Where did she learn such filthy language?'

Bill laughed indulgently. 'These young people sure are precocious. When I was their age, I wouldn't have known one half of what they know today.'

'Don't you think you were happier?' asked Suzette.

'Happier? Why, Tina has everything she wants.'

'My dear Bill, that is why she is unhappy,' said Suzette.

'Look, honey,' said Bill, 'this is America, and this is our way of living. We do everything we can for our kids. They are our number one priority. We don't want to give them inferiority complexes. So do you mind leaving the kids to me?'

It was a reproof. Suzette felt it would be wiser not to say any more, and yet something drove her on.

'Bill, she said that she had told Jay awful things about me. We will have no chance of ever liking one another now. His mind has already been poisoned against me.'

'Don't worry about that,' said Bill. 'Jay's older than Tina. He will be more sensible than that. He'll just love you.'

Suzette was not sure, but she said no more, and they went in to lunch.

'We had better wait for Tina,' said Bill.

They waited half an hour. Mrs Robinson was furious, for

she prided herself on her excellent cooking, and now the meal was ruined.

Tina came in at last. She wore a tight black dress and black patent high-heeled shoes. She had brushed back her hair and smothered herself with heady perfume. She looked a sophisticated thirty year old. She greeted her father affectionately, ignoring Suzette.

All through lunch she talked about some of the holidays the family had spent together, so that Suzette could not join in the conversation.

'Do you remember the time Mummy lost the luggage and we had to go shopping in San Francisco?' she asked Bill. 'When Mummy wrote the cheque, the assistant said "Gee, what pretty handwriting." Mummy did have pretty writing, didn't she?'

Suzette wondered why Bill did not feel embarrassed at the mention of his former wife, but he did not appear to be.

The meal ended at last, and Suzette pleaded that she had to answer some letters. She wanted to leave Bill and Tina alone together, then perhaps he would tell her to be kinder and more tactful.

Once more in her room, Suzette paced up and down, feeling nervous and depressed. How could she try to make Tina a better person without Bill's authority behind her?

At six o'clock she went downstairs again, and found Bill sitting in the drawing room.

'Oh, there you are,' he said. 'What about a drink?'

Suzette kissed him. 'Yes, darling, I would love one.'

He gave her a glass of white wine, and took a highball for himself. She did not dare to mention Tina again, but asked instead about Jay.

'You'll love Jay when you see him,' said Bill.

'Which of the Services is he going to join?' she asked. 'Can you choose in the States?'

Bill shook his head. 'Actually, he's not fit to join the Services.'

'Oh, I am sorry,' she said. 'What's wrong with him?'

Bill looked rather uncomfortable. 'He suffers from insomnia. I have sent him to a psychiatrist, and he says that if his course of treatment is interrupted, Jay will never be cured. I can't handicap the boy like that, so . . .' He cleared his throat. 'I've used some influence to postpone his call-up. Anyway. I've never considered that peeling potatoes helps a young man on in his career.

'Besides,' he went on, 'those kids had a lot to put up with from their mother. I've got to do my best for them.'

'But perhaps it would have been better for him to do his National Service,' said Suzette. 'Don't you think army discipline is good for a young man's character?'

Bill laughed, and didn't answer her question. 'I love you,' he said.

Suzette allowed herself to be kissed, but she did not return his embrace. Then suddenly the telephone rang, and Bill answered it.

'Oh, Jay,' he said. 'Gee, this is a nice surprise. Where are you, son?'

Suzette waited.

'I'll send the car straight away,' Bill said. 'Get your coat, honey,' he said, turning to Suzette, 'Jay is waiting at the station. That's just like my kids, not letting us know when they are coming. They sure like to surprise us.'

'They sure do,' thought Suzette bitterly.

She thought that she had better let Robinson know that Jay was expected. 'Half a second,' she called to Bill, ringing the bell.

'Robinson, Mr Jay is expected tonight. Would you make his room ready for him?'

'Thank you, Madam,' said Robinson. He was grateful to her for letting him know, for usually the Brown children came unannounced and grumbled at everything that was done for them.

In the meantime, the car had been driven round to the door. They drove through the trees and out of the gate, and then towards the station.

'I think I will start practising again,' said Suzette, thinking to herself that her singing would be some consolation, and, after all, she did not have to see much of Jay and Tina.

'You haven't been to the music room yet, have you?' said Bill. 'You'll just love it. It used to be Mother's favourite room. How fond she would have been of you, darling, and so proud of a celebrity in the family. She was half French, too, you know.'

'Really?' said Suzette, immediately interested. 'Did she speak French?'

'As well as she spoke American.'

They arrived at the station. Several people were waiting there to be called for by their friends or relations, and Suzette saw two young men who might have been Jay.

One was tall and arrogant, with brown hair and a handsome face. He was holding a half-smoked cigarette, and now he catapulted it into the air, careless of where it fell.

The other young man was tall too, but more heavily built, with horn-rimmed glasses and a wayward lock of hair falling over his eyes. He looked studious, clever. His luggage was beside him, well-worn but neat. Suzette warmed to him, and prayed silently, 'Please, please may that one be Jay.'

But it was the other young man who sauntered up to them.

'It's been a long time, Dad,' he said. Then he looked down at Suzette. 'And this is Suzette?' He shook her hand. 'She's a mighty pretty girl, Dad. I thought all prima donnas were fat.'

Suzette laughed happily. This was wonderful. Perhaps he had not even believed Tina's stories about her.

'What's been happening at college?' asked Bill.

Jay shrugged. 'Football, dates. . . .' He trailed off. Suzette understood from this that Jay was not exactly a brilliant scholar. She would have liked to find out what he was studying, and what he hoped to do when he left college, but she did not dare to ask. Tina had already given her a complex about interfering in their lives.

They reached the house at last, and Robinson opened the door to them.

'How's the old Limey?' Jay greeted him.

Robinson stiffened and answered disdainfully, 'How's college, Mr Jay?' It sounded like a reproof, which it was.

Jay threw down his coat on a chair. 'Take it to my room, old boy,' he said in an exaggerated English accent.

Suzette flashed Robinson a look of sympathy before she walked into the drawing room, the two men behind her. Once again, she felt worried and uneasy. She hated inconsiderate people, and felt that Jay was behaving badly.

Tina was waiting for them, and she greeted her brother enthusiastically. They went through a ritual of greeting using, it seemed to Suzette, a meaningless question-and-answer technique. Bill looked at all three of them with affection. Did he not feel the tension, the almost open dislike in the room?

Tina was amiability itself, laughing and talking to her father and brother with gay naturalness. Suzette, feeling out of it once more, got up quietly and passed behind Bill's chair, intending to go to her room. He heard the slight movement, and as she passed, took her hand and pulled her down to kiss her. Looking over his shoulder at Tina, she saw a look of undisguised malice in the girl's face.

Slowly she walked up the broad staircase to her room, closed the door and locked it. She felt despair and loneliness. It was hardly credible that the magic of the last ten days could have ended so abruptly.

She went to her dressing case, and sadly took out the toy aeroplane. The red and yellow paint was still unfaded, and looking closely at it she could still see the marks of baby teeth in the wood.

She started to cry silently as she held the toy in her hand. She kissed it, quietly murmuring 'Ilya' over and over again. It was as though her desperate kisses could establish a link of love.

There was a knock on the door, and Suzette guiltily put the aeroplane on her dressing table.

'Who is it?' she called, hoping that her voice sounded natural.

It was Mrs Robinson. 'Is Mr Jay staying for lunch to-morrow?'

'I don't know,' Suzette called through the door. 'Why don't you ask him?'

There was a silence, as if Mrs Robinson was considering how to word her reply. At last she said, 'I would sooner you did, Madam.'

Suzette heard her heavy footfall going down the stairs. She did not like the idea of asking Jay this simple question either—perhaps Tina would make it look as though she wanted Jay to go.

Before she went downstairs again, Suzette put on dark glasses, to hide her red, swollen eyes. She told them that she had a headache. 'Perhaps we could go for a walk before we go to bed,' she suggested to Bill.

Tina answered for him. She pouted: 'Oh, Daddy, I wanted to show you the photographs of my new beau.'

Bill wavered. He could not see the pain in Suzette's eyes as she waited for him to decide. With an indulgent laugh he said, 'Go fetch your pictures, honey. Suzette and I can always go for a walk.'

'Oh, thank you, Daddy,' gushed Tina. She kissed her father and ran from the room. Suzette turned her head away to avoid the gloating glance she felt sure Tina would cast in her direction.

Jay went to the record player, and put on a loud and jarring record, not bothering to enquire whether it would make Suzette's headache worse. He now seemed bored and rather sullen, as though his visit to his father had become tedious. He slumped down in a chair, and put his feet up on another one.

Tina did not re-appear. At last Bill said, 'I wonder what's happened to Tina?'

'I'll go find her,' said Jay with alacrity, as though glad to have something to do. Another five minutes passed, and Suzette became uneasy. What had happened to them both?

'I'm going to powder my nose,' she said to Bill.

'Your nose is fine, honey. But you might see why Jay and Tina are such a long time.'

There was a big mirror in the hall. Suzette took off her glasses and looked at her eyes. They were no longer puffy, and she slipped the sunglasses into her jacket pocket.

Walking towards her room, she was mildly surprised to see the door open—perhaps Mrs Robinson had been in to turn down the bed-cover and had forgotten to close it. She looked in, and was horrified at the scene before her.

Tina had thrown the bedcovers to the floor, and ransacked Suzette's wardrobe. All her clothes were crumpled into untidy heaps.

'Come to join the fun?' asked Tina. 'Jay and I thought we might help you pack.'

'I'm not going,' said Suzette, 'but I would advise you to start packing. I am not going to be subjected to this kind of thing from two spoiled children.'

'Say,' said Jay. He drawled the word out, putting a wealth of meaning into it. If Suzette had foreseen an ally in him, her hopes were dashed in that one word and the way it was said.

He got to his feet slowly, lazily. 'While our stepmother makes up her mind that she's not wanted here, we should be having some fun. Catch, Tina,' he said. He took Suzette's face powder off the dressing table and threw it at his sister. She made no attempt to catch it, and the powder fell on the floor and spilled on Suzette's clothes.

'And what's that?' asked Tina, 'the red and yellow gadget on the dressing table.'

'Isn't that cute?' said Jay. 'Throw it over.'

'Leave that alone!' shouted Suzette. She rushed forward and fought with Jay for it. But he held Ilya's little plane above his head, and she could not reach it.

'Please,' she said. 'Please give it to me.'

He held her away from him with his left hand, and hurled the little toy towards his sister, who caught it and looked at it curiously, turning it round in her hands.

'Why, it's a kid's toy,' she said.

'Put it down,' said Suzette. 'I will never forgive you if something happens to it.'

'What could happen to it?' asked Tina. 'I could drop it.' She dropped the toy. 'And I could tread on it, I suppose.' She crushed it with her foot. The wing crumpled under her weight, and the toy lay in small pieces, broken and forlorn.

Suzette fought like a maniac. She escaped from Jay, bounded across the room and slapped Tina on her white, vicious little face, again and again and again. Tina put her hands in front of her face, screaming.

At that moment Bill came in.

'Oh, Daddy darling.' She ran to him for protection. 'This horrible woman. How could you have done this to us?'

Bill looked over the top of Tina's ruffled head. 'What is the meaning of this?' he asked, his voice sterner than Suzette had ever heard it.

'Look what they have done to our room,' cried Suzette. 'Look at this. Look what Tina has done to this. . . .' She pointed to the little plane.

'We were only kidding her,' whined Tina, looking up into her father's face and trying to guess how he was going to react.

'This isn't funny,' said Bill to them. Then he turned to Suzette. 'I am surprised at you. Have you no sense of proportion? Tina looks older, I know, but she is only a child of fifteen. All this is just their youthful irresponsibility.'

'Can't you remember what it was like when you were fifteen?' said Jay.

'I certainly can. At fifteen I was washing up for hours on end, earning my own living in a cheap French restaurant. I put up with the steam and the hideous noise until I walked home late at night with my mother.'

'At least you had your own mother,' said Tina, feeling that the advantage was slipping away from her. 'Your mother wasn't killed in a car accident.'

'My mother was too poor to go about in cars. She was blown

to pieces by a German bomb.' There was a horrified silence. 'Now, get out, all of you, and leave me alone.'

Bill and Jay were shamefaced, and Tina looked crushed. Mrs Robinson was standing at the door, and stepped aside to let them all file out. She looked at Suzette, her eyes full of unspoken sympathy.

'May I come in and tidy up, Madam? And if you will let me use your phone, I'll ask Robinson to bring you some tea.'

Suzette swallowed hard to keep back her tears. Mrs Robinson's silent sympathy was heavy, almost tangible, and she wondered what might have been said, one woman to another, if they had not been employer and servant.

Chapter Fourteen

SUZETTE could not make up her mind whether to leave at once. First, she decided to go, and actually started to pack her things, but then she realized this was just what Jay and Tina wanted her to do. Why should they have the satisfaction of forcing her to leave the house?

'No, let *them* run,' she thought, and hung her clothes back in the cupboard.

She had collected together the pieces of the broken aeroplane, and was determined to have it mended. It had almost become a mascot for her, and she felt she could not succeed in anything without it.

There was no sign of Jay or Tina at breakfast, though Bill was already downstairs and reading the financial section of the paper.

'Good morning,' she greeted him.

'Good morning, darling,' he answered. 'I am sorry about last night.'

'So am I. Please don't mention it again.'

'You must have a bad impression of the kids,' said Bill, 'but actually they are rather nice when you get to understand them. It is the classic situation of children and stepmother, and inevitably they're jealous. Psychologically . . .'

Suzette broke in, 'Don't try and complicate the issue by making excuses for them.'

'Perhaps you can still win them round,' said Bill.

Suzette put down her knife and fork and looked levelly at him. 'This is something which we must have out once and for all. I am not someone who has wronged your children, and has to crawl for forgiveness to them. I am not interested in "winning them round" as you put it. They were right in one way when they said you should have married an American girl, because you and she would have felt the same about this. You are a wonderfully generous people, but you want to give your children too much of everything, with nothing in return.'

Bill started to protest, 'But since Freud . . .'

'No, let me finish,' said Suzette. 'You've all gone overboard about Freud's teachings. You are so eager that your children should not feel inferior, forgetting one thing.'

'Which is?'

'That children *are* inferior. It takes years of life and experience to create a well-balanced adult. It's like planting a pine seedling and expecting it to grow twenty-five feet in three weeks. Anyway, Bill, it's no use arguing. If I had known you earlier I would have brought up Jay and Tina to be far happier people than they are today.'

'But I give them everything,' Bill said defensively. As he said it, he laughed. 'Oh, honey, I see what you mean.'

Suzette laughed with him, and he got up, came round to her chair and kissed her.

'Bill dear, you must make a choice. This morning I thought I would leave Oaklands and walk out of your life. If you feel that you want to stay married to me, then don't expect me to stay under the same roof as the children.'

'You're not serious?'

'I am. There is no reason why I should be made unhappy like this. I have my other love, my singing, and that could be enough. I will only live with you if you remember that I will not ever tolerate another scene like we had last night.'

She stopped suddenly, realizing that Tina had come into the room and must have heard a good deal of what she had said. In the morning light she looked emaciated, hollow-eyed, and untidy as if she had slept in her clothes. Her eyes were watering, and she seemed in a highly nervous state. When her father laid his hand on her arm, she started, and her face twitched violently.

'What's the matter, Tina? Come and have breakfast.'

'I am going straight back to school,' she said. 'Jay will see me to the station.'

'I'm going back too,' came Jay's voice from the door. He was muffled up in a brown leather lumber jacket. 'You'd better hurry or we'll miss the train.'

Without a word to their father or to Suzette, they both walked out. Typically, they made no farewell, no apology. It was as though last night had never happened.

It was two years later. After the near-disastrous end of their honeymoon at Oaklands, life was good again for them both. Professionally, Suzette was a brilliant success, and it seemed she could do no wrong.

Even now, Bill was overwhelmed at the idea of having her for his wife—she was so talented and beautiful, and he felt he could trust her completely.

Occasionally he had to go on a business trip, which kept them apart for two or three days. Or now and then Tina or Jay would demand to see him. At first, he had been anxious about Suzette's ultimatum, but it affected his way of life very little, and he was beginning to realize the children asked to see him only when they wanted something. Their letters, too, would often be simply requests for more money.

Bill would always pass the children's letters to Suzette for her to read, which she did often without comment. Occasionally she would say, 'So he is in Newport?' or 'Is she visiting friends in Kentucky?', but never more than that.

Then they began to notice that Tina's demands for money were out of all proportion to what she should need. Bill was

a very rich man, but how could a young girl of Tina's age get through twenty-one thousand dollars in a few months?

One morning, as they were driving to board a ship for Europe, Bill showed her a letter from Tina which obviously worried him. It was written on a rather grubby piece of paper torn from an exercise book. Suzette held the unsavoury note gingerly in her hands, hating to touch it. There were two or three lines only, scrawled across the page in Tina's malformed, childish script. It said:

'Dear Dad, Please send me \$10,000 by return. I need it urgently. Love, Tina.'

Bill was obviously waiting for her to say something.

'That is a tremendous amount of money,' she said at last. 'What are you going to do?'

Bill shrugged. 'I guess I'd better send it to her. She must be hitting the high spots.' Then rather lamely he added, 'You're only young once.'

As they drove on, Suzette was thinking to herself, 'Could someone be blackmailing her?' But as Tina was so young, this seemed very unlikely. But what could she need so much money for? Was she buying herself expensive jewellery? No, surely she didn't have such expensive tastes. She knew that Tina would often buy clothes and discard them as soon as they needed cleaning, but even that kind of extravagance would not get her into this kind of debt.

Bill was silent and uneasy. He decided to send the money, but to ask Tina exactly what she wanted it for.

Once on the ship, he left Suzette in her cabin while he went to phone his New York office to leave instructions about sending the money to Tina. When he came back she was surrounded by reporters and, as usual, she charmed even the most hardened of them with her sincerity and warmth.

'How beautiful and kind she is,' he thought to himself. 'It's absurd that my children should not accept her for what she is.' He thought back to the last time Suzette had met Jay. She had been perfectly correct, but cold and brittle, with none of her usual warm vivacity.

Jay had been very subdued and a little uneasy. So Bill had taken him to the library after lunch and said, 'What's on your mind, son? Won't you tell me about it?'

Jay had stared moodily out of the window. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind whether to confide something to his father. But at last he only said, 'Can't you leave me alone, Dad?' Bill said no more.

Several days later, Bill and Suzette were sitting having a quiet after-dinner coffee. They had just eaten an excellent dinner prepared by Mrs Robinson, and Suzette sat with her feet up on a footstool glancing at the local newspaper.

She laughed. 'Listen to this, Bill.' She read out some piece of local gossip which she knew would amuse him, and they were still laughing when Robinson knocked on the door and came in quietly, his face anxious.

'What is it, Robinson?' asked Suzette, in her pleasant French accent.

'It is the police, Madam. Chief Inspector Callaghan of the F.B.I.'

'My God,' said Bill. 'What can have happened?' His first thought was for the children. He bounded out of the room, and Suzette followed him.

'Mr Brown?' asked the detective. He was tall, with dark hair and grey eyes, dressed with unobtrusive good taste. He might have been a banker or a diplomat.

'I am sorry to bring you this news,' he said. 'Three weeks ago a young mother of twenty-three and her four-year-old child were killed by a hit-and-run driver, just out of Beaumont. It was early one morning. An elderly couple saw the accident, but in the excitement they forgot to take the number of the car. They said only that some young boys were driving it, and that they seemed to be racing with another car. Both cars were hotted-up models, and the one which hit the young woman and her child was, they thought, a dark green one.'

'We were called in to investigate. The woman was alive for fifteen minutes, and it is just possible that if the car had stopped and taken her to hospital, her life might have been

saved. After some on-the-spot investigation, we were able to pinpoint the car, and eventually its owner. We found the car actually being re-sprayed in a shed near Wolf Point.'

Wolf Point was the name of the town where Jay was at college. So it was Jay. Suzette knew it even before the detective went on, 'We are charging your son with second-degree murder.'

Bill sat stunned and white. Suzette thought to herself it would have been better if the detective had brought news of Jay's death. He got up, and Suzette showed him to the door. Then she came back to Bill, put her arms around him and stroked the top of his head. She said what was suddenly uppermost in her mind.

'Let's have a child, Bill.'

'No, darling,' he said, withdrawing from her, 'You know we've talked about this before.'

It was true, they had discussed it. Suzette yearned for another baby, but he had always refused—possibly he feared the envy and hatred that would be aroused in his own children.

Bill was weeping silently, and Suzette longed to find some way to comfort him.

But now all that was past, and Suzette remembered it only occasionally. Jay had been sentenced to prison, and naturally it had caused a scandal, but somehow they had all lived through it.

After the journalists had left, Suzette noticed an envelope on her dressing table which had not been there before. She tore it open and started to read, hardly able to believe her eyes.

It was unsigned, and could not have been more anonymous. Indeed, its contents would have been meaningless to anyone but Suzette herself.

'One of our mutual friends, an engineer, is now married. He has a small daughter—his son by a former marriage . . .'

'Ilya!' she thought, so excited that she could hardly read on.

'His son by a former marriage is at one of the best schools,

where only the most promising children are sent. He is at the top of his class, and although so young, is a brilliant mathematician. His education will proceed with great care and he will be treated as a special individual. There will be more news from time to time on his progress. He is well and happy.'

The letter ended abruptly. Suzette tried to picture her little son. How tall would he be now, she wondered? What colour was his hair? She felt a glow of pride at the thought that her son already showed promise of a brilliant intellect. If only he could have been with her today, she thought. There was a knock on the door, and she thrust the letter into her pocket. Bill came in, still rather upset.

'Suzette, I am so worried about Tina.'

'It's no use worrying, darling,' she said.

'But you have never had children, so it's hard for you to understand?'

'What did you say, Bill?' she asked.

'That you had never had children.'

Suzette did not answer. She longed to confide in him, but knew she dare not. In any case, looking at Bill's woebegone face, how could she say how proud she was of her own little son? She had done nothing for him, and yet he would be someone of significance, and Bill's children, who had had every advantage that a wealthy society could give them, were a constant source of anxiety.

There was so much talk of the 'free world' and its advantages. She herself, so long ago, had begged Serge to desert his harsh way of life. But now, after Stalin's death, Russia had a new leader who was far more human, far more approachable, than his predecessor, and for the first time the dreary austerity of many years was relaxed.

Suzette was in the unique position of being able to evaluate both sides of these different worlds. She had never been to Russia, but she knew much about it from Serge.

If only one could have combined the two, she thought. She was no politician, but she realized that to add the tremendous

dedication of the Russians to American humanism would be mutually beneficial.

'What are you thinking about so seriously, darling?' said Bill.

'I was just thinking that Tina might have been far happier, and would have been a useful and well-adjusted person, if she had been brought up under the Russian system.'

She could never have imagined the effect her words would have on him. He had never been so furiously angry with her. He stormed at her as though he had caught her out in some flagrant infidelity.

'If you are a Communist, Suzette, let me know where I stand. We will get a divorce straight away.'

'So,' thought Suzette, 'he knew his first wife was unfaithful to him. She treated him with unspeakable contempt and cruelty, but he stayed with her. And yet such is his fear and hatred of Communism, that he would forget our love and break up our marriage at the very mention of Russia.'

She said to him, 'Bill, my dear, of course I am not a Communist. I know nothing about ideology. I only feel . . .' she paused, searching for words which would not offend him still further ' . . . that perhaps there is something destructively lax in the way democracy brings up its young people.'

'Maybe we have our faults,' said Bill, still offended, 'but don't freedom and democracy mean anything to you?'

Suzette had a mental image of Jay speeding along the highway, and of the broken bodies of a young mother and her child. Was that freedom?

During the rest of the voyage, neither Bill nor Suzette spoke of Tina again. Gradually, Suzette's soothing, undemanding personality restored Bill's peace of mind.

One morning Suzette received two letters, both containing the same piece of surprising news. The first was from her good friend Townsend, who still acted as her agent.

'I have news for you, Suzette,' she read. 'The clipping I am enclosing will give you a pleasant surprise.'

The clipping said: 'Otto Gottwähler, the delicatessen king,

and Madame von Wagenstrate, famous tutor of world-famous songbirds, were married in City Hall, New York, quietly and unobtrusively. The couple said, "At our age we don't need to make a show of it." The article went on to describe the careers of both bride and groom.

The other letter was from Madame von Wagenstrate. It was quite short.

Dearest Suzette, You will be surprised to hear that I am getting married again. My apologies, darling, for not inviting you to the wedding. Otto asked me, and has been so persistent, that I could not wait for your return to attend our wedding, much as you know I would have loved you to be there. We had a very quiet little ceremony, and are so very, very happy. It is almost like being born again. Both Otto and I feel about seventeen years old—how wonderful it is to find love and companionship when one imagined that such things were past. Our fondest love, dear.

Suzette was delighted. She sighed happily, and passed the cutting and letters to Bill.

'Isn't that romantic, darling? Would you have believed . . . ?' She stopped when she saw his expression. He was sitting white-faced, with a letter in his hand, which he now gave her without a word. Horrified, she could hardly believe the words before her.

Chapter Fifteen

DEAR Mr Brown,
We tried to reach you before you and Mlle Breval left for Europe. I am afraid what I have to tell you will come as a severe shock.

We have been extremely worried here during the past few months, because of the steady increase in thefts amongst the students. There have also been several disagreeable episodes when our teaching staff has not been able to maintain discipline.

Since Pelham Martini was enrolled at Marding House there has been nothing but trouble. Last week, we asked his father to take him away, and three days later your daughter Tina became seriously ill.

She raved for several hours before she admitted what was wrong with her. Several times she screamed for Pelham, saying that he could 'give her a fix'. She told us that he had introduced marijuana cigarettes to the school, and later on, heroin.

The seven students who were seduced into this terrible habit would do anything for their drug supplies. Not only did they steal in the school, but some of them organized thefts in Luketown.

We thought at first that she was suffering from some kind of mental disturbance. She became quite violent and we had to call in a doctor. He ordered her to the State Hospital, and from there she has been moved to the Cording Rehabilitation Hospital, where I advise you to leave her until she is cured.

When the doctor examined her, he found that both arms were covered with bruises and punctures from hypodermic needles, and

reported that Tina had been a drug addict for many years, ever since Pelham's arrival at the school. We immediately had every pupil in school screened, and six more of the students were asked to leave.

This has been a grievous blow to the democratic and progressive school system of Marding House. We have always tried to keep our students happy. Now the bad influence has been removed, we hope that it will once again be one of the finest private schools in the States.

We cannot express strongly enough our feelings of sympathy. We endeavoured to do everything we could to look after your daughter. She has always been a difficult student, but she is still very young, and we hope that it is not too late to do something for her.

Sincerely yours,
Leonard S. Broadbent, Principal.

Bill said brokenly, 'I must go home, Suzette. There may be something I can do.' He sighed heavily. 'You are the only one close to me who has never caused me unhappiness.'

'I should have suspected something,' said Suzette. 'You go to her, darling, and I'll stay here and do this film for the Italians.'

'My dear, you don't mind if I leave you?' he asked.

'Certainly not. I shall miss you, but you must go.'

Bill flew early the next morning to the States, and Suzette spent the next three months filming. They wrote often to each other. Bill's letters were cheerful and optimistic. He had gone to see Tina, and gradually they had managed to put a stop to her addiction.

'The old house is certainly seeing some life,' wrote Bill. 'Tina has got to know a whole group of nice young people. We have a party almost every day, and Tina looks better than I have ever seen her. Tomorrow we are going to a nightclub, as it's her eighteenth birthday.'

Suzette felt uneasy. It was not that she was against an eighteen-year-old girl going to a nightclub, but rather that Bill was so obviously making the same mistakes as before. Tina was doing just what she wanted, and Bill was following, as though the parent and child relationship had been reversed.

Suzette tried to read some meaning behind Bill's indulgent, foolish letters. What was really happening at Oaklands, and had Tina really changed from a spoiled brat into a normal young woman?

Some days later, a letter came from Mrs Robinson.

Dear Madam,

I hope you will keep this letter as confidential. Robinson would be very annoyed if he knew I had written to you. I must say that we are longing to see you back home again where you belong. Miss Tina is as wild as ever. There have been many breakages in the house, and I don't know what Mr Brown's mother would have said to see how her beautiful home is being messed up.

Mr Brown is beginning to look very tired. I wish that someone would marry Miss Tina, but then I don't think that any man deserves such a fate.

This last sentence had been scratched out rather inefficiently by Mrs Robinson.

'Poor Bill,' thought Suzette. She had often wondered, since Bill had gone back to the States, whether he would try and insist that Tina should come and live with them. It was rather an awkward position, for she could not very well insist on keeping the girl away now that she needed a home so badly. Now that Jay was out of prison and in South America, she had no one else to turn to.

Perhaps Bill himself would tire of it all, and send Tina away. A few days later she had a letter from Bill which was no longer happy and indulgent:

Tina has decided that she would like to go to South America to see Jay. I wanted to go with her. I know you would understand if I was away for a couple of months, and that our reunion would have to be a little later.

Tina behaved rather badly, I am afraid. She said 'I want to go myself Dad. You make me feel as though I've got a jailer round my neck.' I got her a ticket, and she walked off with a little hand-grip. She told Mrs Robinson to pack her things and send them on, and we haven't heard from her since. There was a postcard from Jay the other day saying 'Having a wonderful time, all well with Tina.'

Come back home soon, Suzette, I am longing to see you.

Suzette's feeling for Bill had undergone a subtle change. She loved him still, but her love contained not quite contempt, but something near to it. He was brilliant and he was tough in business, but criminally indulgent towards his children.

She read the letter through again, and made up her mind to return to the States in three weeks. She sent a telegram straight away, almost as if she feared that she would change her mind if she delayed it.

She decided to fly to New York, where she was greeted by a crowd of fans, then taken straight to where Bill was waiting for her. He embraced her warmly, and over his shoulder she saw another familiar figure, Madame von Wagenstrate, with her husband.

Bill watched his wife as she greeted her old friend with affection. She seemed different somehow, and he felt uneasy. She was radiant, and now there was a maturity, a poise, the self-possession of the prima donna. Suddenly, he was aware of her hard strength, and thought to himself, 'She doesn't need me.'

It made her all the more desirable. Bill finally managed to take her off with him, after she had said a few words to the Press and been photographed.

Suzette no longer travelled alone. She had a secretary as well as a personal maid, to help with the complexities of her busy life. Townsend and his assistant and secretary had also been on the same plane. They followed behind Bill's car, for they were all to stay at Oaklands.

'I can never be truly alone with her,' Bill thought to himself.

'What's the news?' she asked him suddenly.

'You know everything, I think. There's nothing new since my last letter.'

'No further news of Tina?'

'Not a word,' said Bill. 'Just a postcard from Jay.'

'Yes, you told me that in your letter.'

As they drove through the woods towards Oaklands, Suzette started to sing quietly to herself.

'I am a lucky guy,' said Bill. 'Here is the most famous and

beautiful prima donna in the world giving a concert just for me.'

Suzette squeezed his arm. 'Bill darling, I am so very happy to be back with you again. Our parting seemed so long.'

The car stopped and the Robinsons hurried forward to greet her.

'Oh, Madam,' said Mrs Robinson, 'me and Robinson have been praying for this day. Thank God you're back.'

Robinson himself stood stiffly in the background. Suzette seized his hand and shook it. 'How nice to see you here when I return,' she said. 'It is a real homecoming for me.'

Soon, the other guests arrived, and the Robinsons looked after them all happily, with some extra help brought in from the village for the day.

Lunch at Oaklands that day was a gay event. Bill looked at Suzette down the length of the table, and once again thought to himself that she had changed and matured.

Her hair was coiled in a plait round her head like a crown. She wore her pearls, and a very simple dress which was not quite grey and not quite beige. This subtle, soft shade contrasted vividly with her striking colouring. She was vivacious and animated, using her beautifully shaped hands to emphasize what she was saying.

A week later, Suzette and Bill were having a drink on the terrace, and discussing the respective merits of Florida and California for a holiday. They were both agreeing that perhaps California had the better climate, when Suzette's secretary came up to her.

'Mademoiselle Breval, there is a letter in today's mail which I think you ought to see straight away. A copy has been sent to Mr Townsend, and he would like to discuss it with you, perhaps later on this afternoon when you have had time to think it over.'

The letter was from the Russian Embassy. Suzette felt a surging panic, and then calmed herself with the thought that bad news of Ilya would not come in this way. Neither would Townsend have had a copy of a letter which did not concern him.

Suzette read it and passed it to Bill without comment. His brows drew together, and his good-natured face registered disapproval.

'What do you think of it?' asked Suzette at last.

He put the letter down on the table between them. 'You can't want to sing to a pack of murderers—or can you?'

'They are not all murderers,' said Suzette gently. 'Besides, culture has no boundaries and should have no politics.'

She was flattered at the contents of the letter, with its request that she should give a series of five concerts in the Soviet Union. There was indeed a warming up between East and West with its exchange of artistes. Perhaps it might even be the beginning of bigger things—of the gradual lessening of hostility between the two different worlds, a greater understanding.

Serge would have regarded Bill as the epitome of the dangerous, unscrupulous capitalist. Bill would have thought of Serge as a dangerous, unscrupulous Communist. If only Bill and Serge and their prototypes could have met, they would learn that they were both human beings. They would almost certainly have liked one another, for basically, both were honest and idealistic.

Bill said briefly, 'You must do as you please about it.'

'I'll discuss it with Townsend first,' said Suzette.

'I would change your agent if he says that you should go. He can't expose you to being called a Communist stooge.'

'How fanatical Bill is,' thought Suzette, 'as fanatical as Serge denouncing capitalism.'

'Personally, I want to go,' said Suzette, standing up. 'I'll go and see Townsend before lunch. I don't need time to make up my mind.'

Bill was angry, but before he could think of anything to say, Suzette had left him alone. He poured himself another drink.

Suzette found Townsend with Madame von Wagenstrate. They were excitedly discussing the proposed journey.

'Congratulations,' said Madame. 'This is a great honour for you.'

Townsend was looking through a little notebook. 'We could certainly manage those dates, if you don't mind it breaking in on your holiday.'

Bill joined them. 'Isn't it thrilling about Suzette's invitation?' asked Madame von Wagenstrate.

'What's so thrilling about it?' answered Bill. 'I just don't understand how you can forget what Russia stands for. Doesn't democracy mean anything to you people? What about you, Townsend? Surely you are not impressed by an invitation from those gangsters?'

Suzette found herself getting angry. There was contempt in Bill's tone. What right had he to be contemptuous? He was always talking about the American way of life, always eager to point out Russia's deficiencies, of which he knew virtually nothing.

Suzette loved America and the American people. They were open-hearted and generous, and most of them were sincere, but some were also complacent, naive and dangerously unaware of where their policies would lead them. They shouted for equality, forgetting that men were not equal. They put power into immature hands and were astonished at the results. They gave their children the privileges of adults, and the children turned out badly.

After lunch, Suzette and Townsend made plans together, Suzette trying to conceal her excitement. Perhaps she would even see Ilya. But Townsend's next words almost dashed her hopes.

'It will be most exciting to see what Russia really is like,' he said. 'Apart from the honour of the invitation, it is worth the journey for that alone. Though, if what we hear is true, the visitor is under constant surveillance, and it would be impossible to do anything they didn't want you to.'

'But that's terrible,' said Suzette. 'It means that if you have friends in Russia you cannot go to see them?'

'You could not, you would not dare to see them. But then all this does not apply to you.' He laughed. 'The only friends you have in the Soviet Union are record fans.'

'If only you knew,' thought Suzette, and once more it struck her how impossible it would be to tell anyone her closely guarded secret.

There were times when she doubted the reality of that episode in her life so long ago. Could she really have a son and a former husband, or had all that happened to somebody else?

'I would never recognize him,' she thought. She had nothing of him except the little wooden aeroplane so carefully mended. And her memories.

'Suzette, what is the matter?' asked Townsend. 'You're not afraid to go to Russia are you? Nothing can happen when you are a guest of the government.'

'I am not in the least afraid,' she answered.

'But . . . ?'

'But nothing. When do we start?'

'Two months from now will be the perfect time. You are engaged for a season at the Met. after that.'

That night, Bill asked Suzette what she had decided.

'I am going, darling. I am not a Communist, and neither are any of the other famous artistes who have been honoured with an invitation.' She said impatiently, 'You are as scared of Russia as a child is scared of a bogey-man.'

'And with very good reason,' said Bill.

'But we must try somehow to abolish this distrust. Just think how far humanity could progress if we could stop spending so much time, talent and money on hating each other.'

'I cannot see it your way. Suzette. We have got to fight for our American way of living. We have got to defend our way of thinking.'

Suzette recovered her good humour. 'Dear Bill,' she said, and kissed him. Dear, loving, loyal Bill. She could never be really cross with him for any length of time, for his qualities, and even his weaknesses, blended into a good, kind man.

At last, the day of parting came. Bill could have gone with her, but he wouldn't. It was almost as if he feared to have his idea of Russia destroyed by reality.

Chapter Sixteen

SUZETTE and her entourage were now circling in their aeroplane over Moscow. It was early winter, and the first snow had fallen. The city looked like a setting for a fairy tale, with a touch of the Orient in the domes of the Kremlin. The sparkling sugar-icing quality of the snow was broken here and there by the dark, spiky shapes of pine trees.

Suzette was tense with excitement. She closed her eyes in an ecstasy of emotion at the idea that her feet would soon be touching the soil of Ilya's home.

She was somehow convinced that she would meet Ilya. Suzette knew that there was a friend behind the messages which had been sent to her, and the friend must be Ilytsin. Perhaps he had even engineered her visit.

The plane taxied in and Suzette opened her eyes. The hostess announced, first in German and then in Russian, 'The passengers may now leave the plane. I hope you have had a good flight, and that you will be flying with us again.'

At the airport an imposing-looking woman with thick, black, grey-streaked hair, with two young men standing respectfully behind her, greeted Suzette. 'I am Elena Andreyevna Vostok. Welcome to Russia. I am in charge of your comfort, and am at your disposal to make your visit to our country run smoothly. If you need anything, please ask me.'

'Thank you very much,' said Suzette.

'I will hurry up your going through Customs and the other formalities.'

Suzette marvelled at Elena Andreyevna's command of English. She had hardly a trace of an accent, and if she had worn more feminine clothes, and had her long hair cut, she could have passed as an English housewife.

Suzette noticed with surprise that the Customs officers were mainly women, and that they examined everyone's luggage with the utmost care. Two of them set about examining the luggage of Suzette and her party. They scarcely looked at the clothes, but they minutely examined a book which Suzette's secretary was carrying. At a sharp word from Elena Andreyevna they reluctantly gave the book back. Suzette had the impression that they were longing to confiscate it, but did not dare because of Elena Andreyevna's authority.

Two limousines were waiting for them at the exit. Suzette commented on the sleekness of the shining, black cars, and Elena Andreyevna said with pride, 'These are the latest productions from Zis.'

They drove away, and soon entered the Moscow suburbs. Suzette looked eagerly through the windows at the passers-by. It was cold, but with the same invigorating quality of cold that one had in the States, so different from the damp, penetrating cold of Western Europe.

She noticed that all the Muscovites wore boots and were bundled up with clothes, especially the children, who were practically spherical. They seemed to be wearing several layers of wool, with huge scarves and woollen caps upon their heads, leaving just a portion of their faces clear.

'You must be careful of frostbite,' Elena Andreyevna said to Suzette, 'especially on your ears. It is likely to be colder than this during your stay here.'

'How do you know when you are frostbitten?' asked Townsend.

'I remember an aunt of mine in Leningrad,' said Elena Andreyevna, 'who was going for a walk one afternoon. An

army officer suddenly gripped her arm. "Madam, I beg of you," he said, "stop immediately." My aunt stood still and was quite alarmed at the wild look in the officer's face. He stooped down and grabbed some snow from the ground. "I beg your pardon," he said, rubbing her ears vigorously. She screamed, thinking that she had been attacked by a madman. A small crowd gathered around them, and he explained to them all that he had seen her ears white and shining, the typical first sign of frostbite. My aunt remembered afterwards that she had foolishly washed her face and ears with hot water just before going out, and had forgotten to wear a scarf.

'You will be going, of course, to Leningrad?' she went on. 'What a wonderful city! How I wish I could live there.'

'Why don't you?' asked Suzette.

'I have to work here.'

'But can't you change your job?' asked Townsend.

'We are not allowed to change a job for such a flippant reason,' she said.

'Or indeed, to change it for any reason,' thought Suzette to herself. 'But perhaps times have changed since Stalin's day.'

She remembered how Serge had always worried about where he would be allowed to live. This had always seemed such a fundamental freedom to her, and the thought of being ordered to stay in one place was appalling. She travelled so much that she would have felt like a trapped animal if she had been forced to stay in an uncongenial place.

At last they arrived at the hotel, and Suzette and her party were ushered into the foyer. It was decorated in a plushy, opulent mixture of baroque and Victoriana.

The reception clerk spoke in French to Suzette and in English to Townsend and his assistant. Again Suzette marvelled at the ease with which Russians spoke other languages.

Suzette was escorted to her suite, where there was a large bouquet of flowers awaiting her. She looked at the card and read,

To Suzette Breval, with Compliments and Best Wishes from the members of the Moscow Opera House.

She was touched by this gesture. It could have been no easy matter to procure a bouquet of flowers in the Russian winter.

She went sightseeing that afternoon. Elena Andreyevna kept her word about showing Suzette anything she wished to see. She was taken to the Kremlin, which was like a city within a city.

She felt tired in the evening after all the excitement and new sensations, and told Elena Andreyevna that she would like an early night. Her first concert was planned for two days later, and tomorrow there was to be an official reception where she would be meeting some of the Soviet Union artistes.

The next day was spent in looking round the city and the shops. Suzette wanted to absorb as much as possible of the ordinary everyday life in Russia so as to take back a memory of the country as Ilya knew it.

The shops were crowded, and Suzette and her party drew many curious stares. She paused at one of the counters where there was no queue, and as she looked at the merchandise on the counter, she noticed that the salesgirl had surreptitiously run her hand over Suzette's handbag. It was as though the salesgirl could not believe that such quality existed without physically touching it.

Later on in the same store, Suzette pointed to an excited crowd of women. 'What are they all doing?' she asked.

'Follow me,' said Elena Andreyevna. She pushed her way unceremoniously through the women, who gave way as soon as they saw the badge on her lapel—this seemed to work like a charm wherever they went.

Now they saw the cause of all the excitement. For the first time, Elena Andreyevna became almost feminine at the sight of the treasure before them.

'You see, this is something which one could never have seen in the war years. It shows things are getting normal.' She grabbed one of the garments. 'Coloured knickers!' she shouted at Suzette, waving them in her face.

That is what they were. They could never have been described as 'panties'. They were made for the ample proportions

of women like Elena Andreyevna. They were all pink, and made of some opaque material.

Seeing how rare it was for these women to be able to buy anything at all feminine in the shops, Suzette asked herself now if she would really have been happy coming to live in Russia with Serge. Would she have become bitter at having to give up all the comfort and glamour which she had earned for herself?

As she dressed that night for the reception, she thought of Ilya. What would he have thought of her as a mother, with her perfumes, jewels and fine clothes? Would he instead have preferred an Elena Andreyevna with her mannish suits and thick stockings?

Surprisingly, the reception was a truly glittering affair. Suzette had not expected such a party. There were army officers of high rank, whose uniform, basically the same as in Czarist days, made touches of gay colour amongst the guests. There were several Government ministers, and Suzette was introduced to many of the artistes and diplomats who made up Moscow society. She also recognized the names of one or two eminent scientists.

'This is Comrade Ilytsin, Minister of Cultural Affairs,' said Elena Andreyevna.

Ilytsin stood before her, hardly changed after all these years. Suzette would have recognized him anywhere.

Without a flicker of recognition in his face, he said, 'Welcome to Russia, Mademoiselle Breval. We in the Soviet Union are great admirers of your voice.'

Suzette took her cue from Ilytsin. 'Many thanks,' she said. She smiled at him warmly, but then walked on to talk to someone else, for she had an uncomfortable feeling that she was always watched.

Later that evening, Ilytsin sought her out again. In front of Elena Andreyevna, Townsend and two army officers, he gave her what could only be a message.

'I have just been making arrangements for the last concert you will give before your departure to the States,' he said. 'We

in this country think highly of culture, and there is a tremendous demand to see and hear you, so we have decided that the best workers in several fields should have the opportunity of being at that last concert. There will be representatives of the chemical industry, the textile industry, and education. And also we shall have two school children who have shown the most brilliant promise as students.' He paused, and only he could answer the unspoken question in Suzette's eyes. Was one of the children Ilya? He nodded imperceptibly.

'Why two students?' asked Elena Andreyevna, always curious.

'One is a boy, and one is a girl, of course,' Ilytsin answered.

'Very proper,' said Elena Andreyevna. 'You see, Mademoiselle Breval, in our country there is no discrimination against the sexes. We are all judged by what we can give in talent to our country.'

One of the army officers interrupted her to say, 'We are intensely interested in education, and consider it the key to all that is good in life. Our young people are given wages during the time they are students. To pass an examination is top priority, for it is the difference between being a man of means and being an unskilled worker.' He coughed and looked apologetically at the other Russians. 'Not, of course, that it is any disgrace to be a low-paid Comrade, but we reward our citizens according to their usefulness to the State.'

Elena Andreyevna broke in. 'We are encouraged to do our best,' she said to Suzette. 'From the very earliest age we are taught it is our duty to do nothing but our best. We all have an equal chance, and it is up to us to take the opportunity when it is offered to us.'

Suzette could not help thinking that these words and ideas would have made Tina and Jay much better people. There was not the slightest embarrassment when any of the Russians talked of such qualities. In fact the word 'education' brought a glow to their eyes, a look of respect which other people might have worn when they spoke of God.

To many Americans, such devotion to education in an

individual would have provoked such remarks as 'Egg-head', 'Highbrow', or something equally derogatory.

That evening, as they had been driving to the reception, Suzette had asked about an imposing, floodlit building on a hill, which seemed to dominate the city. It looked like a great cathedral.

'That is the University,' Elena Andreyevna said proudly. 'All the youth of the city longs to be a student there one day.'

Suzette now wished that she could have spoken privately to Ilytsin to ask him about Serge and Ilya, but she did not dare to attract attention by talking confidentially to him in a corner of the crowded reception room.

She knew how much Ilytsin must have risked to send her messages from time to time. He was a good man, and a good friend. Obviously he was now an important person, and she was pleased for him that he had made a success of his life.

Later she was introduced to Mrs. Ilytsin, who bore a striking resemblance to her husband. They could almost have been brother and sister. She spoke of her husband to Suzette in glowing terms, and it was easy to see that she was very much in love with him, and proud of him too.

Suzette noticed that Mrs Ilytsin was addressed as 'Doctor' when the French Ambassador's wife came up to talk to them, so she asked about her work.

Dr Ilytsin shrugged. 'There is nothing to tell. A doctor's life is much the same all over the world. We heal the sick.'

'Dr Ilytsin is far too modest,' said the Ambassador's wife. 'She is the head of a clinic, and to see her you have to make an appointment three months ahead. She is a famous heart specialist.'

The guests were thinning out now, and Suzette sought out Townsend. 'I think we ought to be leaving,' she said. 'I don't want to, but you know I must rest before a concert.'

They said goodbye to everyone, and Suzette fell asleep in the ample bed, in spite of her feverish excitement at the thought that she would be seeing her son in a few days after such a long interval.

Performing in Russia was exciting too. Everyone seemed to take their relaxation and culture so seriously, and they would make a knowledgeable audience. Fortunately, Suzette found the idea of this stimulating instead of intimidating.

She was singing *Manon*. It was most flattering to see the huge crowd, a queue which circled the whole block of the Opera House, waiting to get in to hear her. She could hardly believe her eyes. How did they know about her, she wondered.

She asked Elena Andreyevna, who accompanied her and her party everywhere. 'Your records are often played on the radio,' was the reply, 'and occasionally we get shipments of your records from Germany. You have a huge following in Russia.'

Suzette wondered if, had she gone back to Russia with Serge, she would have enjoyed so much popularity.

The American anthem was played, followed immediately after by the Russian one. Townsend, who was standing in the wings with her, whispered. 'I never thought I would live to hear those two anthems played together, and especially in Russia.'

The curtain rose, and the opera commenced. Suzette's reception was as overwhelming as at La Scala. She felt tired after the performance, but satisfied and happy. It would have been disastrous for her if she had failed to captivate an audience of Ilya's people. Ilya. She turned her head away into the corner of the car as she was being driven back to the hotel, and whispered the name to herself. Ilya. The two syllables which spelt for her intense longing and sorrow.

It hurt her to think of him, and yet her unhappy thoughts were mingled with sweetness. Sometimes, when she had just woken up and was still drowsy with sleep, she would imagine that her child was in her arms again. He would be as she had last seen him, still a baby, with the red and yellow aeroplane held in his chubby fist. And then she would wake with a crushing sense of harsh parting and bereavement.

Suzette's other performances were equally successful, and she had rave notices in the Russian papers. Elena Andreyevna,

with her usual efficiency, presented Suzette with the cuttings from the newspapers with their translations typed neatly and attached to the original. All heaped praise upon her.

Then came Leningrad, and the day she had been waiting for for so many years.

There had been another fall of snow, and the women road workers were clearing the streets. Suzette was always astonished at the number of tough jobs that Russian women undertook so cheerfully.

Amazingly, the freezing cold did not stop people in Leningrad from taking their exercise. Perhaps it was through the housing shortage that no weather, however severe, could keep them from walking, their favourite occupation. Everywhere you saw young and old couples, families, and groups of students wandering up and down along the many beautiful roadways and in the parks.

Suzette was singing *Butterfly*. It was a coincidence which she would have liked to avoid, but Townsend had said, 'You must perform *Butterfly* last to give a good impression before your departure.'

She had argued and pleaded with him for a change of programme, but he was adamant.

As soon as she came on stage she looked searchingly round the huge auditorium, but the faces in the audience were indistinct, and it was impossible to distinguish individual features.

She sang exquisitely, and at the end of her performance thunderous applause rose from the other side of the footlights. It was an exciting climax to her tour. They called her back again and again, and finally she came forward to the front of the stage and said quite simply, 'Spasibo.'

This inspired another outburst of appreciation. The Russians were enchanted by Suzette's having learned a few words of their language.

'Now you will be meeting a deputation of our most talented people,' said the manager to Suzette after the last curtain had come down. 'You have already been told about it, of course.'

Later, Suzette hastily removed her make-up and dressed in a white evening gown of finest wool, delicately embroidered with gold. She wore a white evening coat to match, lined with gold lamé. It was a warm yet exotic ensemble, which looked almost Russian. Under her snowboots she wore small golden slippers.

The two Zis cars which had been lent to Suzette and her party sped towards the People's Palace of Culture where the reception was to be held. In Suzette's car, Elena Andreyevna sat in her black artificial silk evening dress, with her thick woollen coat over it.

Townsend and the manager of the opera house shared the car with them. They soon arrived at the Palace, which had formerly been owned by the favourite of a long-dead Tzar.

The huge reception rooms were now busy with noise from those who were being rewarded for some outstanding performance. There were two or three factory workers, who had doubled the normal output of the factories where they worked. They were pasty-faced, distracted-looking individuals, who had ruined their health to achieve a superhuman result.

There were several scientists, biologists, physicists and teachers, and a deputation from a collective farm, who had produced bigger and better crops than anyone else in their district. They were being entertained in Leningrad on a royal scale.

There was a mixture of costume from evening gowns to uniforms, suits and dresses, and several women were wearing traditional Russian blouses with high necks and full sleeves.

Suzette's eyes searched restlessly amongst all these people, trying to catch a glimpse of someone resembling Ilya. Then someone tapped her arm and said, 'Now may I present to you Tamara Ivanova Chernikov and . . .'

She looked past the little girl, who was blushing and had a look of intense concentration behind steel-rimmed spectacles, to a young man. No, he was not a young man, he was still a boy.

She could have fainted at the sheer joy and realization that

it was Ilya. He wore the standard Russian schoolboy uniform, but it was a shock to find the infant she remembered was now several inches taller than she. He had her black hair and slanting eyes, but he had his father's quizzical one-sided smile.

She did not hear the introduction, and stared at him as though in a trance.

Tamara Ivanova was saying some carefully rehearsed speech in English, which ended with the words, 'The schoolgirls of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics salute you, and are proud that you have come to sing in our country.'

And now Ilya was speaking in heavily accented French. His voice, with its Russian inflection, was something she would treasure as long as she lived.

'Mademoiselle Breval, it is a great honour to meet you, as Tamara Ivanova has said. I shall remember all my life the beauty of your singing.'

Suzette put out her hand to touch him, and could hardly stop herself weeping. He was so tall, and yet still had the slenderness of boyhood. If only she had been able to see him grow to near-manhood, if only she had not been cheated of a mother's joy at watching the gradual development of her child.

She could not bear to waste even a second of this precious time together. She spoke his name. 'Ilya, tell me, what will you do with your life? What do you want to do more than anything else?'

He looked at her, surprised and flattered. 'Why,' he said 'I am studying physics.'

Someone at his side, who must have been a teacher, prompted him. 'Ilya Sergeivitch will be one of our greatest physicists. He already shows promise far beyond his years, and soon will be given special training. A young mind is like a plant—it must be cultivated.'

Suzette forced herself to say, 'Naturally. Your parents must be very proud of you.'

She felt a sudden stab of intense jealousy for Ilya's step-

mother, and then suppressed it. Ilya was answering her, and she listened intently.

'My father is well pleased with my progress, but I never knew my mother. She and my father were divorced many years ago.'

'And you cannot remember her at all?' asked Suzette.

'No,' he said.

Danger or no danger, she had to speak to him without the giggling schoolgirl at his side. 'I would like some Kvass,' she said. 'Let's go and find some. Tell me,' she went on as they walked away together, 'you have no recollection at all?'

'No,' said Ilya, 'but I often dream of my mother. In my dreams she is beautiful and kind. My stepmother is very kind to me too, but she is not my mother, and is more like a sister or an aunt. In my dreams my mother is so clear, but when I wake up her image goes away.' He turned to Suzette. 'You know, I would be so proud if my mother looked like you, if she was as talented and beautiful. . . .'

His voice trailed off. Suzette turned her head away, and now the tears were flowing unchecked down her cheeks. She touched her son's arm, and then suddenly they were parted from one another by the crowd. She tried to fight back to where she knew she had left him, but then realized he must have left with his teacher.

She pretended her tears were the result of her wonderful reception, then she thanked them all and left.

The plane which took her back to the West and to her husband was quite unreal to her. Desperately she tried not to wake from the dream; to be back in the crowded room, and hear the boy's voice. She felt the throbbing of the plane almost as part of herself, then she fell into a deep sleep. Subconsciously she re-lived the precious hours in Leningrad. Ilya's face and his voice came to her again and again, and with a new perception she now saw more clearly the problems posed by the constant dissension between East and West.

She saw the Americans, whom she had grown to love, and

the Russians, whom she had grown to respect, as individuals, as human personalities. For their own good they would have to join what was best in both worlds, otherwise there could be only universal disaster and retrogression. While they went on putting so much energy and talent into the Cold War, no one could give their time to lead and educate the world's backward people who sorely needed help.

Now, feeling as if she was coming round from an anaesthetic, she was conscious that the throbbing, pulsing noise of the plane had changed to the lighter sound of a car engine.

'Wake up, darling!' cried Bill. 'We are home.'

She opened her eyes, and saw Bill's kind, familiar face.

Now she remembered hearing the girl's words as she got into the car, 'How lucky she is.'

If only she knew.

